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GOD, DEATH, AND THE AFTERLIFE: REFLECTIONS ON TIME AND ETERNITY

Our Contemporary from Now until Eternity:
Christological Recapitulation of Time in Barth
Adrian Langdon

Paul Tillich on Eternal Life
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Bradley East

The Myth of Heaven:
Demythologizing and Remythologizing
David W. Congdon

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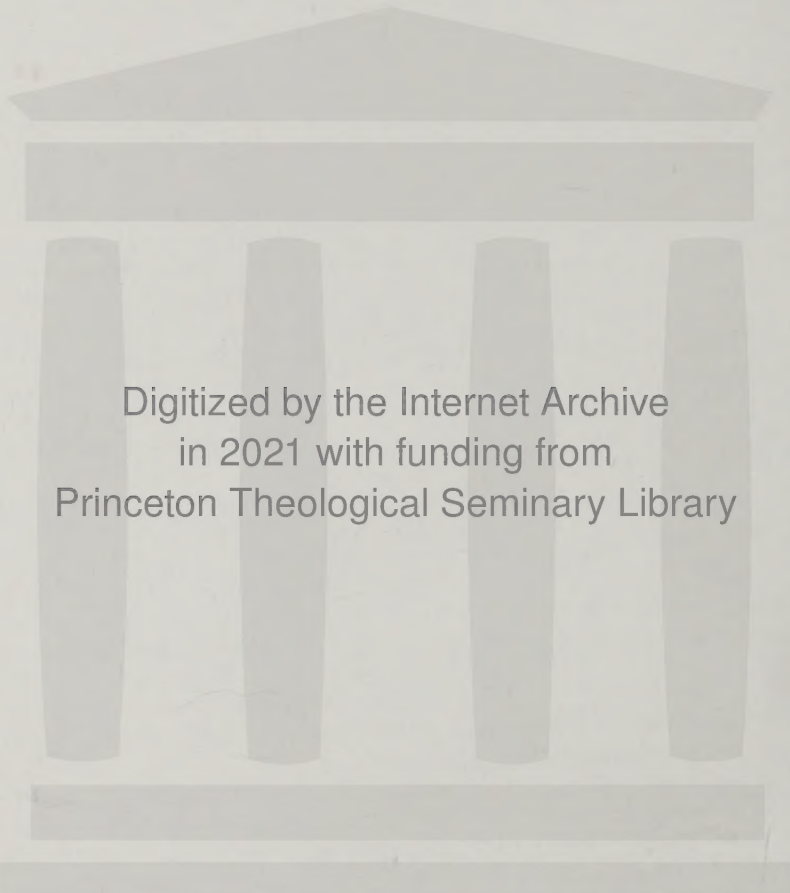
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Prolegomenona

In his posthumously published lectures on Christian doctrine (1912-13), Ernst Troeltsch gave his appraisal of the state of eschatology in the wake of the Scientific Revolution and the rise of modern historicism: "The other-worldly can signify nothing other than the gradual emergence of the fruits of the higher life, and an even deeper inner growth in a divine world of spirit. The modern theologian says: The bureau of eschatology is generally closed these days. This is because the ideas that undergird such eschatology have lost their roots."¹ In truth, not all branches of the bureau of eschatology were closed for the modern theologian. For instance, the popularity of J.N. Darby's dispensationalism and the sustained argument over disparate forms of millenarian nationalism kept the United States branch open through the nineteenth and on into the twentieth century. Moreover, Troeltsch's own German branch of the bureau of eschatology was only closed for remodeling. The doors would reopen far sooner and with greater force than he anticipated.

The first shots of the Great War were still ringing in the ears of the European population when eschatology found its place safely in the center of new forms of Christian theology and New Testament scholarship. In the mid-1920s, one representative of dialectical theology gave a fresh appraisal of the situation: "A Christianity that is not wholly and utterly and irreducibly eschatology has absolutely nothing to do with Christ."² Given the subsequent proliferation of eschatologically-centered theology—from Roman Catholic personalism to Protestant theologies of hope to liberation theology and apocalyptic theology, to name a few—it is no surprise that the twentieth century has been called "the century of eschatology."³

¹ Ernst Troeltsch, *The Christian Faith*, trans. Garrett E. Paul (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1991), 38.

² Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Ewyn C. Hoskyns (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), 314. (translation altered.)

³ Christoph Schwöbel, "Last Things First? The Century of Eschatology in Retrospect," in *The Future as God's Gift: Explorations in Christian Esachtolology*, ed. David Fergusson and Marcel Sarot (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), 217.

And yet, Troeltsch did get one thing right: the ideas undergirding pre-modern eschatology have lost their roots, and any attempt to replant them cannot go without contest. Even theologians espousing more traditionalist views on death, heaven, hell, and the afterlife cannot help but take into account modern cosmology, the nature of history in relation to God's final act, the existential aspects of God's work among us here and now, and the present and future dynamics of the kingdom of God. Furthermore, though eschatology found itself at the front and center in twentieth century theology and beyond, there are as many views on the scope and significance eschatology as there are theologians.

This issue of the *Princeton Theological Review* reflects this reality. Not every author considers the end of physical life and corporeal resurrection directly, but all deal with the "end" or "goal" of human life for today while also looking forward with expectation and hope for tomorrow.

In "Our Contemporary from Now until Eternity," Adrian Langdon argues for a new interpretation and critical correction of Barth's theology of time and eternity. Reflecting on the way in which Jesus' history as the second Adam relates to our own, Landgon argues that Christ's corporeal resurrection and unique temporality calls into question Barth's notion of "ending time" and death as the positive completion of human life. While uncovering possible deficiencies in Barth's anthropology as it is patterned on his Christology, Langdon also hints at possible resources within Barth's theology for constructing a new resurrection theology.

In the second article, Daniel Pedersen, a PhD candidate at Princeton Theological Seminary, examines "Paul Tillich on Eternal Life," demonstrating the christocentric nature and universal scope of Tillich's modern understanding of eternal salvation. For Tillich, eternal life is preeminently concerned with Christ and his universal permeation of this life and the everyday aspects of historical existence.

The following two articles by Adam Kotsko and Matthew O'Reilley offer theological interpretations of scripture with special emphasis on the narrative shape and use of metaphor in interpreting the coming kingdom of God. In "The Resurrection of the Dead: A Religionless Interpretation," Kotsko argues that the locus of action in the post-resurrection accounts of the gospels shifts from the ministry of Jesus to the ministry of his disciples, who are pushed into the exigencies of the unknown through the power of the Holy Spirit. In "Toward an Eschatology of Hope," O'Reilley hones in on the

ancient metaphorical significance of disappearance of the sea in Rev. 21:1. He concludes with some ethical and theological implications for Evangelical churches in North America today.

From the experiences of pastoral ministry and personal crisis, Kenneth Roxburgh earnestly reflects on “Dying Well before Family, Friends, and the Community.” With comfort, certainty, and hope in God’s suffering, dying, and life-giving presence in Jesus Christ, Roxburgh suggests that the uncertainties of death and life after death shouldn’t keep us from living and loving with simplicity in the power of the resurrection today. Similarly, in “Turn, Turn, Turning No More,” Brad East considers the implications of Christ’s death and resurrection for a world which searching for comfort in sterile predictability and/or resignation in the face of hapless unpredictability. The satisfaction of the Christian, East argues, comes only in the disruption of this world’s death-dealing habits and faithless acquiescence to “more of the same.”

In the final article, Princeton Theological Seminary PhD candidate David Congdon critically reviews Christopher Morse’s recent book, *The Difference Heaven Makes*, along with the 25th anniversary edition of J.T. Robinson’s classic, *In the End, God*. Congdon evaluates the historical judgments and theological interpretations of Morse and Robinson while also offering his own account of the theological and ethical significance of heaven in a “world come of age.”

Altogether, the articles in this issue of the *Princeton Theological Review* reflect both the centrality and multivalency of the doctrine of the last things in contemporary Christian theology and biblical interpretation. The Christian who professes that Jesus is Lord of this world cannot help but ask about all of existence—even death—once again with the certainty of faith. It is our hope as editors of the *Princeton Theological Review* that you will benefit from this issue as we critically consider what it means to witness to Jesus as Lord over the beginning and ending of our lives.

Nathaniel A. Maddox
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Princeton Theological Review

OUR CONTEMPORARY FROM NOW UNTIL ETERNITY: CHRISTOLOGICAL RECAPITULATION OF TIME IN BARTH

ADRIAN LANGDON

How is the salvation accomplished by Christ “there and then” applied to us “here and now”? Or, to paraphrase Lessing, how does one cross the ugly ditch between the contingent truths of history and the necessary truths of reason? Karl Barth answers such questions on time, but not by accepting the presuppositions of the so-called problem of faith and history. Rather he does so by articulating one of the most profound attempts in Christian history to relate the risen, ascended, and returning Christ to human temporality. In so doing, Jesus Christ is not only viewed as the Lord of the past and present—“then” and “now”—but of the eschatological future as well.

The aim of this article is twofold. First, descriptively, I will suggest that Barth’s discussions of Christology and time in *CD* III/2 and IV/2 may be coherently understood with the use of the concept of recapitulation.⁴ Second, along the way we will critically engage Barth’s view suggesting its strengths and weaknesses. Two basic concerns need to be kept in view. First, articulating the time of Jesus Christ must protect the successive and proleptic nature of Jesus-history, with each episode in its sequential relation to the others. In other words, one episode of Jesus-history is not to carry emphasis or meaning that is due another. Second, Jesus-history must be soteriologically related to the time of humanity. The contemporaneity of Jesus Christ must direct, condition, and transform all other times on the way to the eschaton.⁵ Barth generally takes up these two concerns, though there are problems with his view that will be pointed out. The paper will proceed episodically: the resurrection and forty days, ascension and heavenly session, and the eschatological completion of time. Before this, however, a brief discussion of recapitulation and time is necessary.

⁴ This selection, of course, is limited. Earlier sections of the *Church Dogmatics* in relation to fulfilled time could have been used as well (see, for example, *CD* I/2, 45ff and III/1, 72ff; hereafter *Church Dogmatic* abbreviated as *CD*). A fuller articulation would also use the concept of anticipation, as Jesus-history is anticipated in pretemporal eternity, creation history, and the history of Israel. What is more, a fuller discussion of the Father as the creator of time and the Holy Spirit as the agent of ecclesial time would bring out the full trinitarian breadth of Barth’s view.

⁵ These two concerns arise from engagement with David Ford, *Barth and God’s Story: Biblical Narrative and the Theological Method of Karl Barth in the Church Dogmatics* (New York: Peter Lang, 1985); and Douglas Farrow, see esp. *Ascension and Ecclesia: On the Significance of the Doctrine of the Ascension for Ecclesiology and Christian Cosmology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1999), 229ff.

RECAPITULATION OF TIMES

The first theologian to make extensive use of ἀνακεφαλαίωσις or *recapitulatio* was Irenaeus of Lyons (c. 130-200). In his context, ἀνακεφαλαίωσις was a formal term of Greek grammar and rhetoric referring to the “summary or recapitulation of a narrative.”⁶ While Irenaeus was likely trained in Greek rhetoric, his use of the term is materially controlled by his theological concerns, using the biblical narrative with special reference to the being and work of Jesus Christ.⁷ As John Lawson states, Irenaeus develops the doctrine that the activity of Jesus Christ was a “going over the ground again.”⁸

Jesus Christ went over the same ground as Adam, but in the reverse direction. He placed Himself in the same circumstances as Adam, and was confronted with the same choices. At every point where Adam weakly yielded, slipping down to destruction, Christ heroically resisted, and at the cost of His agony retrieved the disaster. . . . The benefits of this victory can pass to mankind, because Christ was acting as the Champion of humanity.⁹

Important to note in Lawson’s description is what may be called the logic and movement of *retrieval* and *redirection*. Jesus Christ goes over the same ground again as Adam, though resisting instead of yielding, and then becomes the champion whose benefits “can pass to mankind.”¹⁰

Like Irenaeus, the fulfilling-time of Jesus Christ for Barth both retrieves the true purpose of created time, as the locus of covenantal relations between God and humanity, and redirects all time and history on the way to the eschaton. All other times find their true meaning in the particular time “filled” with the being and activity of Jesus Christ.¹¹ Given the constraints of this paper, the focus will be on this redirection of time.¹² Time “may seem to move out of the void, but it is

⁶ Robert Grant, *Irenaeus of Lyons* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 50.

⁷ Ibid., 52-53.

⁸ John Lawson, *The Biblical Theology of Saint Irenaeus* (London: Epworth Press, 1948), 143.

⁹ Ibid., 144-145.

¹⁰ Similarly, Douglas Farrow states that Irenaeus’ version of recapitulation has a “reduplicative force—the logic of *transformation* as well as of *headship*.” *Ascension and Ecclesia*, 56. (Italics added.). Or, in temporal terms, “creation time and fallen time—though quite distinct—are brought together in Christ, and that the conflict between them is overcome at his own expense” (ibid., 58).

¹¹ Barth considers recapitulation and time in his reflection on Ephesians 1:10: “The One who wills and accomplishes and reveals the *anakephalaisis* also wills and accomplishes and reveals the ‘fulfillment of the times.’ It is with the summing up of all created being in Christ as its Head that the *καιροι*—the individual times of individual created things—are not cancelled or destroyed but fulfilled. None of these times moved into the void. They all moved towards this goal, this event, and therefore this particular time” (CD III/2, 459).

¹² For Barth, the Son’s mediating history retrieves the original intent of created time, “time for” fellowship with God, and in so doing heals fallen time; see CD III/2, 71ff.

actually moving from this event" (CD III/2, 459). The full narrative of Jesus-history constitutes this redirection.

RESURRECTION AND EASTER TIME

The first episode of Christ's contemporaneity is the immediate, limited, and proleptic time of the forty days. While Barth often uses language that suggests a finality during the forty days suitable only for the eschaton (especially in CD III/2), he nevertheless argues that it is a proleptic episode, anticipating ascension time and the final *parousia*, and sees it in sequential relation to the other episodes of Jesus-history. But we must not neglect to highlight Barth's own critical concerns. This includes not only defending the resurrection as an event in history but also critiquing the so-called modern problem of faith and history.

In III/2, when relating Jesus Christ to allotted time, individual time from birth to death, Barth views the resurrection and forty days as the beginning of a "second history" beyond the "first history." (CD III/2, 441 ff).¹³ In the first place, he argues, contra Bultmann and others, that the resurrection is an event that occurred in a particular time and place, and that the resurrection and forty days are really Easter *history* and Easter *time*. Belief in the resurrection was not the product of apostolic preaching, but was the result of "the recollection which concretely created and fashioned this faith and preaching, embraced this time, the time of the forty days" (CD III/2, 442). Barth defends the historicity of the resurrection again in IV/1, stating that it is an event in time and space, an act of God, and thus historical (CD IV/1, 333-342). It is of course different than the cross in that there is no direct account of its occurrence; there is the sign of the empty tomb and the appearances of the risen Jesus to the disciples. As such, it cannot be viewed as historical in the same way as the cross, and in relation to the criteria of modern historical research it is clearly not historical (CD IV/1, 334-36). Since it is an act of God beyond human observation and agency, moreover, it can be termed a "saga" or "legend," analogous to the original creation (CD IV/1, 336).

After critiquing Bultmann in III/2, Barth explains the significance of the resurrection for the time of Jesus. While Barth notes this as the time of the man Jesus,¹⁴ his emphasis lies more on the *vere Deus* of Chalcedon—the resurrection is the unveiling of Jesus Christ as God.¹⁵ He states that "the *man* Jesus was

¹³ Also important for Barth here is that the resurrected One is the basic epistemological presupposition of the first Christian communities. "All the other things they know of Him, his words and acts, are regarded in the light of this particular event, and are as it were irradiated by its light" (CD III/2, 442).

¹⁴ This is evidenced in the anti-docetic fine print discussions; see CD IV/1, 441, 448, and 455.

¹⁵ This is commensurate with Barth's focus in CD I/1 where he views the resurrection of Jesus Christ as the "unveiling" of the second person of the Trinity. Barth consistently connects the

manifested among them in the mode of *God*" (CD III/2, 448). While previously his deity had been "veiled," during the "forty days the presence of God in the presence of the man Jesus was no longer a paradox. . . . but He was now wholly and unequivocally and irrevocably manifest" (CD III/2, 449). Barth continues: "There takes place for [the disciples] the total, final, irrevocable and eternal manifestation of God himself. God Himself, the object and ground of their faith, was present as the man Jesus was present in this way" (CD III/2, 449). It is for this reason that in the NT the title of *Kyrios* is applied to Jesus (CD III/2, 450).

The language Barth uses to describe this unveiling ("total, final . . . eternal manifestation of God") surely cannot be justified if the further history of Jesus and the Church are to be seen in their successive integrity. As Ford comments on this section: "The distortion is that the content of the Gospel accounts of the resurrection appearances does not bear out Barth's claim that they represent a unique fulfillment and completeness, a manifestation of eternity in time. They have more the character of 'sendings' into the future, and there is at least as much promise as fulfillment."¹⁶ Barth's description, then, distorts the view of the forty days as but one episode of the Son recapitulating time.

Yet why does Barth construct his view in this way? Ford's suggestion that Barth moves beyond the literary function of the forty days is only descriptive. I would argue that the veiling-unveiling-imparting schema is combined here with Chalcedonian ontology (*vere Deus*) to alter the NT narrative.¹⁷ In this view, the resurrection is the unveiling of the identity of Jesus as the Son of God, and this unveiling must have the sense of finality because the unveiling is identified with *vere Deus*. But by identifying the moment of unveiling in revelation solely with the fully God of Chalcedon, Barth imposes an interpretation of the forty days not suggested by the narrative. Colin Gunton's distinction between the saving activity that is revealed and the God who reveals this helps to explain this critique:

[W]hile it is undoubtedly true that God identifies himself through the action of the Spirit to be the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the focus of that action . . . is the salvation brought by Jesus of

resurrection of Jesus Christ with unveiling, especially as it initiates the self-revelation of Jesus Christ, by the Spirit, to believers. See Dawson, *The Resurrection in Karl Barth* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2007). For Dawson's discussion of III/2 see ch. 6.

¹⁶ Ford, *Barth and God's Story*, 145.

¹⁷ Barth's discussion of revelation in CD I/1 uses this schema to argue for the self-revelation of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. On Barth's early use of the veiling-unveiling dialectic see Bruce McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development 1909-1936* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 269-70, 274, and 327-28. On Barth's view of revelation as a triune event see Trevor Hart, "Revelation" in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, 37-56.

Nazareth. *The centre is not divine self-identification but divine saving action.* Thus it is preferable to say that revelation is first of all a function of that divine action by which the redemption of the creation is achieved in such a way that human blindness and ignorance are also removed.¹⁸

So while “there seems little doubt that the resurrection is, from an epistemological point of view, the revelatory event *par excellence*, confirming as it does the revelations of the previous narratives,” it “is an eschatological event, and as such an anticipation of final revelation.”¹⁹ It seems, then, that Barth’s description of resurrection time as the final fulfillment of eternity in time is unwarranted if its proleptic function is to be preserved.

The resurrection and its relation to time are taken up again in *CD IV/1* with a different emphasis. In *IV/1* not only does the resurrection inaugurate a new history, as in *III/2*, but the emphatic language of final fulfillment is absent. The unveiling function of the resurrection shifts to the atonement achieved on the cross and not merely Jesus’ identity as the Son of God (epistemology follows soteriology). This enables Barth to appreciate the proleptic nature of the resurrection and forty days and view it in its successive relation to other episodes of Jesus-history.

The most focused discussion of time in *CD IV/1* is found in discussing the resurrection’s relation to the cross in the “The Verdict of the Father,” § 59.3. While the primary concern is to explain how the resurrection appropriates the reconciliation completed on the cross to humanity,²⁰ the secondary concern is the problem of faith and history, the distance between *Christus pro nobis tunc* and *Christus pro nobis nunc* (*CD IV/1*, 287).²¹ The usual attempts to overcome this problem include mediation in not only existential religious experience, as in Bultmann and Herrmann, but also in recollection through tradition and scripture, which can be assumed to refer to Roman Catholicism and forms of Protestantism (*CD IV/1*, 287-88). Such attempts to bridge Christ “then” to Christ “now” are critiqued by Barth as forms of what may be termed pseudo-contemporaneity.

¹⁸ Colin Gunton, *A Brief Theology of Revelation: The 1993 Warfield Lectures* (London: T&T Clark, 1995), 111. (Italics in original.)

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 116.

²⁰ As he puts it: “There is a great gulf between ‘Jesus Christ for us’ and ourselves as those who in this supremely perfect word are summoned to regard ourselves as those for whom He is and acts” (*CD IV/1*, 286).

²¹ Here Barth notes Lessing’s dictum that there is a separation between the necessary truths of reason and the contingent truths of history (*CD IV/1*, 287). One can also discern at work Barth’s “intensive, although for the most part quiet, debate with Rudolf Bultmann” (*CD IV/1*, ix) in this section.

According to Barth, this modern problem and its religious counterparts have “more the character of a technical difficulty” than “that of a spiritual or a genuine theological problem” (CD IV/1, 288). The distance between Jesus Christ and the rest of humanity is in reality a harmartological separation: “on the one hand it is God for man, on the other man against God” (CD IV/1, 290).²² In other words, Lessing’s problem is one of sinful humanity in its fallen time.

But how is Jesus Christ contemporaneous with each human in their times? First, Barth reiterates that Jesus Christ was the one representative on the cross and that there has occurred a real objective alteration of the situation between God and humanity (CD IV/1, 289). Second, the transition into the anthropological sphere is enabled by the resurrection. The resurrection is the event and occurrence that inaugurates the second history of Jesus Christ beyond that of death. For Barth, true contemporaneity is found in Jesus Christ, the living Savior, and not the pseudo-contemporaneity of human recollection or experience (though mediation does play a role during ascension time).

For example, in expounding the meaning of the resurrection in its relation to the cross Barth begins to unfold a more nuanced view of resurrection and time (CD IV/1, 309-333). While assuming the alteration of the human situation on the cross, in which there is a new creation and ultimate *telos* for human existence and time, the resurrection is the unveiling of the atonement made there *and* inaugurates the further history of the crucified and living Savior (CD IV/1, 311-12, cf. 316). This is articulated with reference to the twofold *parousia* of the forty days and the final eschaton, along with the interim time of the Church (CD IV/1, 333). Barth sees this as the crux of the subsection, which is concerned with the transition from the ontic to the noetic.

To reflect on this transition Barth again takes up the problem of time, now issuing the christological response of an eternal time: as “the One who was in [his allotted time] He became and is the Lord of all time, eternal as God Himself is eternal, and therefore present in all time” (CD IV/1, 313). The resurrection reveals “His eternal being and therefore His present-day being every day of our time” (ibid.). As the one mediator between God and humanity he is “active and at work once and for all” (ibid.). In fact, “His history did not become dead history. It was history in His time to become as such eternal history—the history of God with the men of all times, and therefore taking place here and now as it did then. He is the living Saviour” (CD IV/1, 314).²³

²² The genuineness of Lessing’s problem arises from “a very genuine need: the need to hide ourselves (like Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden) from Jesus Christ as He makes Himself present and mediates Himself to us” (CD IV/1, 292).

²³ Later in reflecting on the resurrection’s unity with the cross and the rest of redemptive history (CD IV/1, 342-346), the ongoing recapitulating history of Jesus Christ is restated (CD IV/1, 343). It

In the discussion of the resurrection and time in IV, then, there is little indication that the resurrection is the fulfillment of eternity in time, as found in III/2. The emphasis of the unveiling function of the resurrection shifts to the atoning work of the cross and not the identity of Jesus Christ as the Son of God, the focus is more soteriological rather than epistemological. There seems to be more attention to the narrative sequence of the cross and resurrection (and to be seen shortly, the ascension and eschaton), and not on the Chalcedonian identity of Jesus Christ as *vere Deus*.

ASCENSION AND HEAVENLY SESSION

The ascension and heavenly session are the time of Christ's invisible presence and activity to the community mediated by the Holy Spirit, especially in word, sacraments, and other spiritual gifts. In comparison to the resurrection and forty days, however, the ascension and heavenly session receive sparse treatment. There is even a tendency for Barth to deny the ascension as an event. The result is that Barth uses the dialectic of visible-invisible to describe the christological mediation during the heavenly session and not presence-absence.²⁴ Despite these issues, Barth's description of the ascension and heavenly session do uphold this as a separate episode and its proleptic nature is noted, though the soteriological importance of it is downplayed. Thus it is fair to say that Barth has an underdeveloped theology of the ascension and heavenly session in both III/2 and in IV/1.

Barth's treatment of the ascension in III/2 is found in two places: first, in the discussion of the "Second History" of Jesus Christ in relation to allotted time, and, second, in discussing Jesus Christ in relation to the present. In the first discussion, Barth gives an exposition of the ascension and the concept of "appointed times" (καιροὺς ἰδίους) in relation to the forty days. In a fine print exposition, Barth views the ascension, along with the empty tomb, as *signs* of resurrection time: "the ascension—Jesus' disappearance into heaven—is the sign of the Resurrected, not the Resurrected Himself" (CD III/2, 453). The empty tomb and ascension, moreover, "mark the limits of the Easter period, at one end the empty tomb, and at the other end the ascension . . . they are both indicated rather than described; the one as an introduction, the other as a conclusion" (CD III/2, 452). He also adds that some gospel writers "do not refer to the ascension as a concrete event" (CD III/2, 453). Undoubtedly Barth is correct in suggesting that

is suggested that the life of Jesus Christ may redirect all times because it is "an eternal life, a life which is also continuous in time. And that means that God, and we too, have to do with the Crucified only as the Resurrected, with the one event of His death, only as it has the continuing form of His life" (CD IV/1, 343-344).

²⁴ For criticism of this "invisible presence" in Barth see Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia*, 250 ff.

the empty tomb is a sign, but surely he is mistaken to deny that the ascension is an event in Jesus-history.²⁵ Even his description of the ascension does not support this claim.

Nevertheless, while Barth *suggests* that the ascension is only a sign he still *describes* the ascension as an event in Jesus-history. He begins by describing the ascension as Jesus' disappearance into heaven. Heaven is defined as the "sum of the inaccessible and incomprehensible side of the created world" (CD III/2, 453).²⁶ When Jesus ascended, "[h]e entered the side of the created world which was provisionally inaccessible and incomprehensible" (CD III/2, 454). But oddly, this disappearance is not described as an event; rather it is the sign of Jesus' "hidden presence," evidenced for Barth in the biblical language of clouds surrounding the ascension story (Acts 1:9; CD III/2, 454).²⁷ Barth also points to the unique role and identity of the ascended one: "who ... lives on the God-ward side of the universe, sharing His throne, existing and acting in the mode of God, and therefore to be remembered as such, ... and henceforth to be accepted as the One who exists in this form to all eternity" (CD, III/2, 454). What is more, the proleptic function of the ascension is noted as well:

He reveals Himself not only as the One who according to Mt. 28:20 will be with them in this heavenly mode of existence all the days, even to the consummation (συντέλεια) of the age, but also as the One who will come again to usher in this consummation. The ascension is the proleptic sign of the *parousia*, pointing to the Son of Man who

²⁵ In a review of Andrew Burgess' *The Ascension in Karl Barth*, Benjamin Myers criticizes the idea of the ascension as a spatial event. He reasons: "to conceive of this 'agency' in terms of an ascended physical body seems rather problematic. I wonder whether it is intelligible—either scientifically or theologically—to speak of the risen Jesus as though he were simply removed to a different spatial location?" (*Faith and Theology*, "Andrew Burgess: The Ascension in Karl Barth," blog entry by Ben Myers, 30 January 2007, <http://faiththeology.blogspot.com/2007/01/andrew-burgess-ascension-in-karl-barth.html>). He then appeals to Barth for his case. Yet cannot the ascension be seen as both a spatial-temporal event and a theological statement? If the ascension is denied as a spatial event does this not mean that Barth finally succumbs to Bultmann's criteria that theological statements must adhere to a modern worldview? But nonetheless Myers' reading of Barth may not be totally accurate. For a defense of the historicity of the ascension see Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia*, 15ff; and for an attempt to deal with the physical problem of Jesus' bodily absence see Edwin Chr. van Driel, *Incarnation Anyway: Arguments for Supralapsarian Christology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 167 ff.

²⁶ He continues: "so that, although it is not God Himself, it is the throne of God, the creaturely correspondence to his glory, which is veiled from man, and cannot be disclosed except on His initiative" (CD III/2, 453).

²⁷ The visible/invisible distinction rather than the presence/absence distinction will become important when Barth defines the *parousia* further in CD IV.

will finally and visibly emerge from the concealment of His heavenly existence and come on the clouds of heaven (Mt. 24:30) (ibid.).

While Barth suggests the ascension is merely a sign, he does seem to give it positive content. The resurrected Jesus Christ disappeared to the God-ward side of creation and is now hidden and present to his followers. The ascension also indicates that he will come again ushering in the eschaton—thus its proleptic nature. Perhaps the criticism that may be brought against Barth in this passage is the failure to differentiate between the empty tomb and the ascension. Both may be signs of the resurrected one, but the empty tomb is a spatial location whereas the ascension is something that happens to Jesus; it is an event in Jesus-history.

Barth also takes up the ascension in III/2 when discussing Jesus Christ and the present. Here he gives this episode in Jesus-history fuller content with reference to the gift of the Holy Spirit and the sacramental life of the church. Ascension time or the heavenly session is time for the activity of the risen and hidden Lord by his Holy Spirit. Barth again states that for the NT community “the man Jesus is really but transcendentally present” (CD III/2, 467). Barth argues that the transcendent and hidden presence of the exalted man Jesus is the foundation for the life of the church. The time and history of the church is lived in the presence of the ascended One, who is truly Lord over all time. Following this, the church is to make known to the world the reconciliation completed in the cross and resurrection (CD III/2, 467). Jesus Christ’s presence and agency is distinct, however, from the contemporaneity of other humans. His presence is not immediate but mediated through the work of the Holy Spirit, which includes preaching, sacraments, and other spiritual gifts, though it is not limited to them (CD III/2, 467-468). Although there is minimal development here,²⁸ Barth does present an ascension and ecclesial time as filled with the activity of Christ by his Spirit—in word, sacrament, and other spiritual gifts. So in the present time, the time of the community before the eschaton, Jesus is contemporaneous by the work of the Holy Spirit.

A discussion of the ascension in connection to the resurrection is found in ‘The Verdict of the Father’ in IV/1 as well. Immediately after declaring the risen Christ Lord of time, Barth provides a fine print section on the intercession or

²⁸ While Barth is developing a theology of ascension here, oddly the fine print section that provides exegetical support focuses almost exclusively on the forty days. His discussion of Paul’s conversion, for example, is likened and grouped with the forty day appearances and is followed by a discussion of the Emmaus road encounter (CD III/2, 470-72). One might expect a discussion of Hebrews instead, as in IV/1. For a discussion of ascension in the NT as well as NT references to the ascension and a brief diagram of the structure of Hebrews in appendix A see Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia*, 275 ff.

ascension time. Here he reflects on a number of NT passages, eventually focusing on Hebrews, which includes statements on Jesus as the eternal high priest who makes intercession for the Church (Heb. 7:25).²⁹ This is summed up in the temporal language of Heb. 13:8: He is "the same yesterday, today and forever". The intercession, in fact, is related to the main question of the subsection: "How does the atonement made then and there come to us and become our atonement?" (CD IV/1, 314)). The answer lies in recognizing that the Living Lord "is in eternity and therefore today now, at this very hour, our active and effective Representative and Advocate before God and therefore the real basis of our justification and hope" (CD IV/1, 314-315). So rather than being caught up in the problem of the necessary truths of reason and the contingent truths of history, believers are to realize the reality of their present moment under Christ (CD IV/1, 315). The human response is not to be preoccupied with questions of how Christ is made relevant, but rather to offer "prayer in the name of Jesus" (CD IV/1, 314-15). Though he does not provide a more detailed exposition of the intercessory activity, it is evident Barth holds it as a basic dogmatic presupposition.³⁰

After making clear the christological basis of contemporaneity, Barth moves to the anthropological sphere. Here it is the time of the community that corresponds to the reality of the crucified, risen, and ascended Christ. The beginning of this time occurs with the end of the forty days in the ascension. As in III/2, the ascension is viewed as a sign. But the focus here is not the ascension as the signification of the end of the forty days, but as the "sign of His exaltation to the right hand of God, to eternal life and rule; of this transition to a presence which is eternal and therefore embraces all times." There begins, then, another form of his *parousia*, which is characterized "as a time in which He was no longer, or not yet again, directly revealed and visible and audible and perceptible (as He had been) either to the disciples, the community, or the world" (CD IV/1, 318). And as in III/2, this intercession time of his invisible presence needs mediation in the corresponding time of the community. While Barth earlier rejected proclamation, tradition, and recollection as mediation in IV/1, if they are

²⁹ These include Rom. 8:34 ff; 1 John 2:1ff; the high priestly prayer of John 17, and Heb. 4:14, 5:6, 6:20, 7:17, 7:24, 8:1, 9:12, and 10:14, 19.

³⁰ Despite this brief exposition of the intercession, the structural problem of CD IV as a whole in relation to the *triplex munus* still remains. That is, following a Chalcedonian logic rather than the descent and ascent of the God-man, the role of High Priest corresponds to the descent of God, King to the ascent of man, and Prophet to the God-man. Jesus Christ as high priest in this schema is reserved for the cross and a full exposition of the ascended high priesthood is undeveloped. According to Thomas Torrance, after he pointed out the lack of exposition of ascension activity in CD IV to Barth in their last conversation, Barth suggested that Torrance rewrite parts of CD IV to supplement this! See Karl Barth, *Biblical and Evangelical Theologian* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 133-35; Farrow, *Karl Barth on the Ascension*, 141-143.

understood as the human effort to bridge the historical horizons of present and past, he now views them under the mediating work of the Holy Spirit (CD IV/1, 318).³¹ The work of the ascended Lord by the Spirit necessarily includes these forms of mediation. Within this time of the community, moreover, there is the human response of repenting, believing, and accepting the altered situation between God and humanity. This provides the basis and *telos* of the community (CD IV/1, 317-19, cf. 345).

THE ESCHATOLOGICAL COMPLETION OF TIME: HINTS, PROBLEMS, AND SUGGESTIONS

For Barth, the recapitulating history of the incarnate Son culminates in the final return—or, as Barth prefers the final unveiling—of the Son in glory to judge the living and the dead. This will mean his visible, immediate, and universal presence. There are numerous indications of this in the discussions of time being examined.³²

In III/2, for example, Barth discusses Jesus Christ in relation to the eschatological future. He makes clear that his being in time is not confined to the past but includes “a being in the future, a coming being” (CD III/2, 485). Looking from the Easter time of the NT community, Barth peers ahead to Jesus Christ as the Judge, Consummator, and new Creator. In this section, however, there is little exposition of what this final eschaton entails but focuses on Jesus Christ as the foundation of Christian hope and the proleptic nature of the ecclesial time before the final, general, and universal revelation of Jesus Christ (CD III/2, 492). Although what the apostles and their community witnessed was nothing short of the conclusive, definitive, and general revelation of the glory of Jesus Christ in the resurrection, this is merely a “foretaste” or “glimpse” of the eschaton (CD III/2, 487-88). And while Jesus’ resurrection and his final return in glory appear to be two separate events, they are already one event for the resurrected One because he who *was* is he who will *come*.³³ Therefore the Christian is not to think of the last things without thinking of the last One. The final resurrection, judgment,

³¹ In a note on scripture, in particular, Barth argues that the believer cannot expect to look at the texts assembled by the NT community as typical historical sources since they are the instrument of the living Lord as he reveals who he is to the community (CD IV/1, 320). For a description of this mediation, with a focus on scripture, see Andrew Burgess, *The Ascension in Karl Barth* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2004). For such a bibliography see John Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

³² Unfortunately, the fine print discussion supporting post-temporality in CD II/1 (631ff.) is more concerned with Barth’s reading of and relation to eschatological thought since the Reformation, though it is full of important bibliographic material and valuable in this way.

³³ For “him they are a single event. The resurrection is the anticipation of His *parousia* as His *parousia* is the completion and fulfillment of the resurrection” (CD III/2, 490).

restoration, and perfection of eternal life are predicates of his return. This christological focus is repeated in IV/1, though there is more emphasis placed on the final, irrevocable, and universal nature of his unveiled presence (CD IV/1, 326).³⁴ There is ample evidence, then, for what might be called the eschatological filling and fulfilling of time.

Yet inconsistencies arise when Barth actually reflects on the nature of time in the final consummation. The tension is seen when comparing the previous passages with his brief discussion of the eternal preservation of all times in III/3. Here Barth wants to make the point that the limited time of each creature is eternally preserved in God's life. While he rejects the necessary immortality of the creature, this does not mean the allotted time of the creature is lost to the eternal God. In the final eschaton and the completion of history the life of the creature is preserved by God's eternity. For example, Barth notes a "recapitulation" of created existence and states that God's preservation of creation and the creature remains. He explains this in negative and positive terms. Negatively, the eternal preservation of the creature means that "its destruction is excluded." Though the creature is a "transitory speck of dust," God's love for it is the last word. Positively, then, the creature "can continue eternally before Him" (CD III/3, 89). No times will escape the eternal preservation of God (CD III/3, 90). God's eternity recapitulates all times—all that was, is, and will be.

Yet Barth also states that time and history will end. This includes not only time in general, "the totality of everything that was and is and will be will only have been" (CD III/3, 90), but also time as the *Existenzform* of the creature, time experienced as the succession of past, present and future and allotted time. He states that the creature "will not need any continuance of temporal existence. And since the creature itself will not be there, time which is the form of existence of the creature will not be there" (CD III/3, 88). The reason he gives for this termination is the sufficiency of time and history as such. He argues that the limited time of history and individuals is sufficient for God's work with the creature and the human response (CD III/3, 89).

While one may appreciate Barth's view of maintaining the creature after death without resorting to the immortality of the soul, or his insistence that what is preserved is the particular allotted lives that were actually lived (there is no

³⁴ Despite hinting at the final judgment and resurrection of the dead, Barth still insists that the difference between the penultimate and ultimate *parousia* is one of manifesting what has occurred on the cross. Though Barth hints at the eschatological judgment, resurrection, and the salvation of non-human creation in general, this does not include, in his view, an alteration! (CD IV/1, 328).

escapism here),³⁵ the termination of temporality altogether is questionable—if that is in fact what Barth is suggesting.³⁶ It is unclear how humans could exist, even in the state of glorification in the eschaton, without some form of temporality. In *CD III/2*, Barth defines human nature as *imago dei*, ensouled bodies, and existence in time. How can humanity exist if this universal *Existenzform* is taken away? While allotted time, with its definite beginning and end is transformed, it is unclear what glorified existence in the eschaton, including resurrected embodiment, would look like without some form of temporality.³⁷

The physicist and theologian John Polkinghorne, for example, calls into question eschatological views that atemporalize human existence. If eschatological existence is to be a new or transformed creation, and not the destruction of nature as such, then Polkinghorne argues that “human destiny beyond death will no more be atemporal than it will be disembodied, though, once again, there will also be a dimension of discontinuity, so that the ‘time’ of the

³⁵ Eberhard Jüngel explains this idea of the preservation of one’s limited life in God’s eternity in *Death: the riddle and the mystery*, trans. by Iain Nicol and Ute Nicol (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1974), 120.

³⁶ Could it be that Barth is being misread here? We could also point to the earlier work *Credo*, published in German in 1935, where Barth briefly discussed eschatological existence, seeming to give human temporality more place: “Resurrection of the flesh means therefore that our existence as *carnal* existence, our heaven and earth as theatre of revolt, our time as time of Pontius Pilate, will be dissolved and changed into an existence, into a heaven and earth, into a time, of *peace* with God without conflict, of that peace which, hidden from our eyes in the flesh of Christ, is already a reality.” *Credo*, trans. by Robert McAfee Brown. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1962), 169. Here Barth suggests an eschatological time of final peace. Yet he is quite cautious in describing what eternal life might look like: “we ... have not the slightest idea what we are saying when we talk either positively or negatively about the time of that God with Whom we shall live in unbroken peace in eternal life. We can spare ourselves many unnecessary pains ... if we hold fast to what is the decisive feature of eternal life: that it is eternal in its being lived in the unveiled light of God and in so far participating in God’s own life” (ibid., 171).

³⁷ There are perhaps different reasons for the eschatological cessation of temporality in Barth’s view. Concerning internal dogmatic components, Edwin Chr. van Driel connects this problem to Barth’s doctrine of Nothingness. *Das Nichtige* lends to the tendency in Barth of what van Driel terms “creational entropy”, which implies that “creation in and by itself lapses into evil by ontological necessity.” See *Incarnation Anyway: Arguments for Supralapsarian Christology*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 123. He suggests this causes the rejection of human agency, and thus time, in the eschaton since such an existence “would imply an ontological “overagainstness” between the Creator and the creature; but it is exactly such overagainstness which gives space for creation’s entropy. Only if the creature exists no longer in its own being and agency, but is incorporated in the divine life, is it safe.” (Ibid, 124). As for external non-dogmatic components of Barth’s construction, he did not fully integrate subjective time within the objective space-time continuum of the cosmos. If time as the form of existence of the creature ceases to exist then it is also implied that the movement of the cosmos ceases as well. But to suggest this seems too radical a discontinuity between present existence and the eschatological one.

world to come is not just a prolongation of the time of this world.... Rather, it is a new time altogether, possessing its own independent nature and integrity."³⁸ Eschatological time, therefore, will have a different quality arising from the eschatological glorification of the creature and creation in the eternal fellowship with God.³⁹

CONCLUSION

The basic anatomy of Barth's view, then, is that the resurrection demonstrates that Jesus Christ is the living One and thus contemporaneous with all subsequent times. He lived an allotted life like all others but his resurrection inaugurates a new and eternal history in which, as the God-man, he is contemporary and present in all subsequent times, although his presence and activity varies depending on the episode under consideration.⁴⁰ During the *forty days* Jesus Christ was immediately and visibly present as God the reconciler in a particular, limited, and proleptic way. With the *heavenly session* he is mediately and invisibly present in a particular, limited, and proleptic way by the work of the Spirit (especially in word, sacraments, and spiritual gifts). Finally, in the *eschaton* he will be immediately and visibly present to humanity in a universal, unlimited, and final way. The being and activity of the incarnate Son fills and fulfills time in these modes.

It seems, however, that Barth has a less developed view of the ascension and the heavenly session. They are only discussed in relation to the resurrection and often in fine print sections. Clearly for Barth, the resurrection is the focal point in the redirecting work of recapitulation. In III/2, especially, there is a focus on the forty days as the fulfillment of eternity in time, which is problematic if the proleptic nature of the ascension and intercession are to be protected. It appears however that Barth shifts his emphasis in IV/1 and gives a fuller explication of ascension time, especially as he focuses on soteriology instead of epistemology. It was also noted that Barth seems to have an ambiguous view of eschatological time. This last criticism is a bit more tenuous, however, since we are gleaning this from an incomplete doctrine of last things. Nevertheless, what we do encounter in

³⁸ John Polkinghorne, *Science and the Trinity: The Christian Encounter with Reality* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 156-157.

³⁹ For a view of eschatological time which moves in this direction see Jürgen Moltmann, *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology*, trans. by Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996), 279ff; and *Science and Wisdom*, trans. by Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2003), 98 ff. Similarly, in a brief discussion of existence in the eschaton as pure hospitality see Hans Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross: Reappropriating the Atonement Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 257ff.

⁴⁰ The resurrection for Barth is both the unveiling of Jesus as the Son of God and the event of Christ's turning to effect in humanity the work accomplished in him; see Dale Dawson, *The Resurrection in Karl Barth* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2007).

Barth is a profound dogmatic attempt to relate Jesus-history to the Church's experience of time. And if Christians desire to rethink eternity and time, they would do well to begin as Barth does, with the concrete revelation of God in Jesus Christ and not with an abstract definition of eternity.

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PAUL TILlich ON ETERNAL LIFE

DANIEL J. PEDERSEN

"Endless future is without a final aim; it repeats itself and could well be described as an image of hell." -Paul Tillich, *The Eternal Now*¹

In the collection of essays entitled *The Theology of Paul Tillich*, Dr. Nels Ferré of Vanderbilt leveled a full broadside against Tillich. "Paul Tillich is a front-line theologian. He stands at the forefront of profundity," he wrote. "Our question concerning him, let us immediately say, is to what extent he expounds a Christian position."² Undaunted by the criticism, Tillich wrote back in his "Reply":

A fundamental difference seems to exist between Mr. Ferré and myself about the supranaturalistic interpretation of Christianity. Mr. Ferré is aware that I have fought supranaturalism from my early writings on, not in order to support naturalism but because I tried to overcome the alternative between naturalism and supernaturalism. I still hold emphatically to this position which could be called self-transcending or ecstatic naturalism. Mr. Ferré is afraid that this attitude makes my idea of God transcendental instead of transcendent, that it prevents a genuine doctrine of incarnation, that it implies the negation of personal immortality, that it evaporates the independent character of the Church, that it denies a realistic eschatology. He is right if "transcendent" means the establishment of a "world" behind the world, if "incarnation" means the descent of a divine being from a heavenly place and its metamorphosis into a human being, if "immortality" is understood as the continuation of temporal existence after death, if the latent church within cultures and religions is denied, if a dramatic end-catastrophe some time in the future is affirmed. All this is a supranaturalism against which my theology stands.³

¹ Paul Tillich, *The Eternal Now*. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1963), 125.

² Nels F. S. Ferré, "Tillich's View of the Church," in *The Theology of Paul Tillich*, ed. Charles W. Kegley and Robert W. Bretall (New York: Macmillan, 1952), 248.

³ Paul Tillich, "Reply to Criticism," in *The Theology of Paul Tillich*, 341.

Some might find Tillich's denials a total confirmation of Ferré's position. In fact they might not only question the Christian character of Tillich's theology, but also the "profundity" of it—which Ferré seems to praise sincerely—on the basis that the profound ought necessarily to do with those doctrines Tillich qualifies.

Such a dismissal would be overhasty. While Tillich does deny the above doctrines as Ferré would have them he does not deny *every* account of them. Tillich's positive understandings remain unelaborated. This paper will set out to explore one of Tillich's positive doctrines—that of Eternal Life.⁴ If "immortality" does not mean the continuation of temporal existence after death, what does Tillich understand by the doctrine? And if he maintains, against Ferré, that his theology is indeed Christian, how does Eternal Life connect to the person and work of Christ? I will argue that not only does Tillich's doctrine of Eternal Life deserve the name "Christian," but that in some ways it is a superior conception of enduring value.

TILlich's METAPHYSICS

Key to understanding all of Tillich's thought is his essence-existence-essentialization schema borrowed (with modifications) from Schelling. Its major commitments are: (1) that there is an essential basis of reality; (2) that existence actualizes and so makes real its essential basis; (3) that essence is never (apart from the Christological paradox) perfectly actualized in existence; (4) that, as actualized, existence is taken into the eternity of the divine life; and (5) that the essence-existence-essentialization process mirrors the divine life, yielding a view of God as Trinitarian *in principle*.⁵ The essence-existence-essentialization process is the livingness of God. As such, this process is not limited to what God *does*, but what God *is*.

The first sequence in this process is the transition from essence to existence. In characterizing the essence-existence relation as he does, Tillich locates himself between Plato and Ockham—two thinkers who represent opposing ways of reconciling that relation. For Tillich, Plato's philosophy represents a negative valuation of existence in the face of essence. In Tillich's words, "The good is identical with the essential, and existence does

⁴ "Eternal Life" is capitalized throughout to reflect Tillich's own spelling.

⁵ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951-1963), 1:249-252; hereafter *ST*.

not add anything."⁶ Conversely, Ockham's is representative of a positive valuation of existence as identical with essence. For him, "All reality exists, and the essential is nothing more than the reflex of existence in the human mind."⁷ These representational poles are important for Tillich as he locates his own thought in the mediating tradition represented classically by Aristotle. For Aristotle, "The actual is the real, but the essential provides its power of being, and in the highest essence potentiality and actuality are one."⁸ What is significant for him about this middle way (and deficient about the alternatives) is that essence is *made real* in existence. Existence adds to bare essence, but is never *perfectly* actualized (apart from the Christological paradox). Actualization always leaves existence short of its essence.⁹ Yet even so existence bears its own significance in reference to the essential.

Essentialization is the completion of the essence-made-actual-in-existence sequence. This move is uniquely Schellingian¹⁰ with Tillich's own twist. In essentialization essence actualized in existence is taken up into the divine life, not reconciled in history but in eternity. Preliminarily, "being, elevated into eternity, involves a return to what a thing essentially is; this is what Schelling has called essentialization."¹¹ However, Tillich does not mean a return to *mere* essence. That would be overly Platonic and "more adequate to the India-born religions than to any of the Israel-born ones."¹² No,

⁶ ST 1:203. The following examples should be read as types rather than accurate presentations of each thinker's position. Tillich's deliberate rephrasing of their positions into his own vocabulary should be a clue to his intent. He is not primarily aiming for an accurate presentation of others' thought but of his own.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ With those who question his essentialism generally Tillich would agree in a sense; there are no essentials as essentials in existence. Existence is always falling short of its essence (apart from the Christological paradox). In this sense the "hunt for essences" is bound to fail. Yet, he would insist that every philosophy makes essentialist distinctions, if not explicitly then implicitly: "Whenever the ideal is held against the real, truth against error, good against evil, a distortion of essential being is presupposed and is judged against essential being." Ibid., 202.

¹⁰ See F.W.J. Schelling, *Clara, or, On Nature's Connection to the Spirit World*, trans. Fiona Steinkamp (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2002), *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*, trans. Jeff Love and Johannes Schmidt (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2006). For an account of Tillich's intellectual development see Werner Schüssler, "Tillich's Life and Works," in *The Cambridge Companion to Paul Tillich*, ed. Russell Re Manning (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 3-17.

¹¹ Tillich, ST, 3: 400.

¹² Ibid.

essentialization means far more than a basic emanation-remanation process.¹³ "The term 'essentialization,'" Tillich says, "can also mean that the new which has been actualized in time and space adds something to essential being, uniting it with the positive which is created within existence, thus producing the ultimately new, the 'New Being,' not fragmentarily as in temporal life, but wholly as a contribution to the Kingdom of God in its fulfillment."¹⁴ Essentialization eternalizes actualized essence.

In this latter phrasing, Tillich's doctrine of essentialization is obviously eschatological. In fact, his essence-existence-essentialization scheme is intended to correspond to the classic Christian narrative of creation-fall-salvation-eschaton with existence comprising both the fall into separation from God and the stage of salvation experienced fragmentarily in life. Tillich does not hold to this account as a historical narrative but as a symbolic relation of the temporal to the eternal. Eschatology "symbolizes the 'transition' from the temporal to the eternal, and this is a metaphor similar to that of the transition from the eternal to the temporal in the doctrine of creation, from essence to existence in the doctrine of the fall, and from existence to essence in the doctrine of salvation."¹⁵ Tillich's scheme is logical rather than chronological. It frees him from the burden of a historical fall sometime in the past and from the difficulties of an intra-historical apocalypse. Yet, essentialization is still at core eschatological.

Tillich's essence-existence-essentialization scheme allows him to remain close to his Christian heritage in his overall framework while rejecting a supernatural rendering. Existence, though always falling short of its essence, actualizes its being in history and comes to its end in the eternity

¹³ Alexander J. McKelway, *The Systematic Theology of Paul Tillich* (New York: Dell, 1964), 243.; Andrew O'Neill, *Tillich: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: T & T Clark, 2008), 92.

¹⁴ Tillich, *ST*, 3: 401. (My italics.) O'Neill argues that, among other concepts, "the characterization of Eternal Life, the goal of essentialization, as both the union of existence with essence, and also the negation of what is negative in existence to create a new reality; these are not concepts borrowed from Schelling," O'Neill, *Tillich: A Guide for the Perplexed*, 104-05. This can only be true if emphasized selectively. In particular, Tillich may hold to a slightly more radical view than Schelling of the meaning of essentialization for the divine life itself. But these are modifications of an already established Schellingian framework. The larger continuities are already present when Schelling states, "But the good should be raised out of darkness into actuality in order to live with God everlastingly, whereas evil should be separated from the good in order to be cast out eternally into non-Being." Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations Into the Essence of Human Freedom*, 67.

¹⁵ Tillich *ST*, 3: 395.

of the divine life by the process of essentialization. Tillich's account of world history, personal destiny, and the Christ will all add concrete content to this general framework.

ETERNAL LIFE IS THE END OF HISTORY

Though Tillich does not hold to any "dramatic end-time catastrophe," he does not doubt that existence within space and time will come to an end. However, "This event is a small one within the universal temporal process."¹⁶ "End," therefore, should not be taken as an event, or the end of events, but instead as *telos* or "aim," that to which something drives.¹⁷ In this sense Eternal Life is the end of history.¹⁸

By identifying Eternal Life as the end of *history*, and not merely of individuals or of humanity, Tillich broadens the object of divine love to the entire universe and to all of time. In this way he also accounts for the interrelated nature of all reality. There are no absolutely discrete beings who individually drive to Eternal Life. There is only the process by which being drives toward its end, though personal centers remain differentiated by degree and gradation. Though individuals do have a personal destiny in Eternal Life, "without the consideration of the end of history and of the universe, even the problem of the eternal destiny of the individual cannot be answered."¹⁹ History as a whole is taken into Eternal Life.

What then is the content of Eternal Life? First, Tillich is clear about what Eternal Life is *not*. Chiefly, it is not supranatural—that is, "an idealized reduplication of life as experienced within history and under the universal conditions of existence."²⁰ This account is denied because of the utter cleavage it advocates between historical life and Eternal Life. A supranatural account of Eternal Life "is established in eternity, and the problem of human existence is whether and in what way individual men may enter the

¹⁶ *ST*, 3:394.

¹⁷ O'Neill, *Tillich: A Guide for the Perplexed*, 90.

¹⁸ Tillich *ST*, 3: 394., See Christian Danz, "Le Royaume de Dieu, But de l'Histoire: l'Eschatologie Comme Réflexion Sur l'Histoire Chez Paul Tillich," *Études Théologiques et Religieuses* 84, no. 4 (2009), 481-495.

¹⁹ Tillich *ST*, 3: 396. According to J. Heywood Thomas, "His view of history was in several ways the coping-stone of his system for Tillich. It was something which could not be avoided at any point in the total argument because it impinged on everything." J. Heywood Thomas, *Tillich* (New York: Continuum, 2000), 160.

²⁰ Tillich *ST*, 3: 397.

transcendent realm.”²¹ It combines both a deficient conception with the limited aim of “getting into heaven.” Thus, a supranatural account, Tillich argues, results in an account of history devoid of genuine meaning. Historical life, by this account, contributes nothing to the Kingdom in eternity. Against this conception, Tillich offers his own proposal. He calls this his “dynamic-creative interpretation” of Eternal Life:

Its basic assertion is that the ever-present end of history elevates the positive content of history into eternity at the same time that it excludes the negative from participation in it. Therefore nothing which has been created in history is lost, but it is liberated from the negative element with which it is entangled within existence. The positive becomes manifest as unambiguously positive and the negative becomes manifest as unambiguously negative in the elevation of history to eternity. Eternal Life, then, includes the positive content of history, liberated from its negative distortions and fulfilled in its potentialities.²²

The history of all being—though especially of beings possessing finite freedom (i.e., humans)—forms the raw material of which the Kingdom is composed in its purifying elevation to eternity.²³ This history is not merely significant for the eternity of created beings. For, “What happens in time and space, in the smallest particle of matter as well as the greatest personality, is significant for Eternal Life. And since Eternal Life is participation in the divine life, *every finite happening is significant for God*.”²⁴ Tillich can even claim that “God is eternally creative, that through himself he creates the world and through the world himself.”²⁵ Eternal Life is the elevation of existence into eternity (essentialization). This process is the *telos* of history

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ See McKelway, *The Systematic Theology of Paul Tillich*, 244.

²⁴ Tillich *ST*, 3, : 398 (my italics). For a process theologian’s take on Tillich’s thought, see Charles Hartshorne, “Tillich’s Doctrine of God,” in *The Theology of Paul Tillich*, ed. Charles W. Kegley and Robert W. Bretall (New York: Macmillan, 1952): 164-95. See also Tillich’s critiques of Hartshorne in Tillich, “Reply to Criticism”: 339-40.

²⁵ Tillich *ST*, 2: 147. “*Gott macht sich selbst*,” as Schelling puts it. See F.W.J. Schelling, *Sämtliche Werke*, 14 vols. (Stuttgart and Augsburg: Cotta, 1856-1861), 7: 432.

and the self-constitution of God.²⁶ Both creation and eschatology are thoroughly theocentric.

UNIVERSAL ESSENTIALIZATION

It is in the context of the liberation of the positive from the negative elements of existence that Tillich locates his doctrine of ultimate judgment. In the ambiguities of life the negative intermingles with the positive, disguised as positive, living as parasitic on the good, and manifesting itself – when it does – as demonic distortion. However, “The appearance of evil as positive vanishes in the face of the eternal.”²⁷ To evil, Eternal Life is a “‘burning fire,’ burning that which pretends to be positive but is not.”²⁸ In this way the unreality of the negative is disposed of by the “fire” of God’s righteousness. This aspect of Tillich’s doctrine of Eternal Life is fairly traditional.

But that is not all Tillich has to say about ultimate judgment, and what he goes on to claim qualifies the tradition enormously. Tillich combines in careful consistency his notion of the gradation of all being with the intermingling of the positive and negative elements of life together with the claim that being as being is good: “If being as being is good—the great anti-dualistic statement of Augustine—nothing that is can become completely evil. If something is, if it has being, it is included in the creative divine love.”²⁹ In judgment:

Nothing positive is being burned. No fire of judgment could do it, not even the fire of the divine wrath. For God cannot deny himself, and everything positive is an expression of being-itself. And since there is nothing merely negative (the negative lives from the positive it distorts), nothing that has being can be ultimately annihilated. Nothing that is, insofar as it is, can be excluded from eternity; but it can be excluded insofar as it is mixed with nonbeing and not yet liberated from it.³⁰

Being is never excluded from Eternal Life as a whole. In fact,

²⁶ See Donald R. Weisbaker, “Process Thought in Tillich’s Eschatology,” *International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion* 5, no. 2 (1974): 91-107.

²⁷ Tillich *ST*, 3: 399.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, See McKelway, *The Systematic Theology of Paul Tillich*, 243.

²⁹ Tillich *ST*, 3: 408.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 3:399.

nothing *insofar as it is* is excluded from eternity. Only preliminarily, before the “fire” of eternity has liberated being from its nonbeing, is it excluded from Eternal Life. In the face of eternity, judgment and mercy are one and the same, consuming and liberating in one moment.³¹ This liberation *is* the process of essentialization, the ever-present raising of created reality to eternity which is, in turn, an aspect of the livingness of God. This process is not only a merely a universal process in the sense that it includes every particular. In a much stronger sense this process is universal: all being, the universe as a whole, is essentialized into the divine life. Because, for Tillich, there is no absolute distinction of one being from another and being as being is good, all being as a whole is taken into the divine life. Thus the universal scale of essentialization results in a qualified doctrine of universal salvation.

Tillich’s doctrine of universal essentialization is one of his most unique contributions to theology. It achieves this status by judiciously navigating between the poles of a mechanistic universalism, on the one hand, and a description of individuals “either as being everlastingly condemned or everlastingly saved,”³² with its extreme of double predestination, on the other. The former he rejects because, in this view, the seriousness of life contributes nothing to eternity. There is no risk or consequence, and therefore no meaning. However, against the traditional solution of dividing all people into elect and reprobate Tillich has even stronger objections. The first objection is anthropological: “Absolute judgments over finite beings and happenings are impossible because they make the finite infinite.”³³ The second is theological in the narrow sense: in condemning any being in their totality God condemns that which is good along with that which is not. Since being and goodness are coterminous with the being of God, in condemning any being absolutely God has condemned Godself. The division of humanity into two camps—one saved, the other lost—“introduces an eternal split into God himself.”³⁴

In lieu of these two unsatisfactory solutions, universal essentialization seeks to marry the seriousness of life with the undeniable goodness of everything insofar as it is and with the inter-related nature of all

³¹ For a similar view on the identity of mercy and judgment see Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, ed. H. R. Mackintosh and J. S. Stewart (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1999), 544.

³² Tillich, *ST*, 3: 407.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*; See McKelway, *The Systematic Theology of Paul Tillich*, 244.

reality. As above, the negativities of life are let go to their nothingness and at the same time being is liberated from its negativities. However, a life mired in the negativities of existence is lesser in eternity. Since nonbeing cannot be eternalized, those whose lives are more dominated by evil have less real being to contribute. Nevertheless this limitation is itself qualified by the inter-connected nature of reality since *a* being is never essentialized in isolation from all being. Eternal Life is thus a *sharing* in the actualized existence of all being: "It is as impossible to separate one from another as it is, consequently, to separate the eternal destiny of any individual from the destiny of the whole race and of being in all its manifestations."³⁵

The seriousness and promise of Eternal Life is extended to all reality. The seriousness of life is magnified since each individual's Eternal Life is constituted not only by their own existence but also that of others. Each person has an ultimate reason to work for the fullness of life of every existent being since they all share a single destiny. Likewise, the promise of Eternal Life is extended as even the least fulfilled life enjoys the same shared eternity as the most fulfilled:

This finally answers the meaning of distorted forms of life – forms which, because of physical, biological, psychological, or social conditions are unable to reach a fulfillment of their essential *telos* even to a small degree, as in the case of premature destruction, the death of infants, biological and psychological disease, morally and Spiritually destructive environments...In the essence of the least actualized individual, the essences of all other individuals and, indirectly, all beings are present.³⁶

Because only what is actualized is essentialized, history has ultimate consequences for Eternal Life. But since being is essentialized universally, the tragedies of history are never unmitigated, and even the least actualized individual shares in the most actualized life.

By holding to the shared nature of Eternal Life, Tillich's doctrine of universal essentialization naturally leads to the question of individuality in eternity: To what degree is Eternal Life personal? The answer to this question, Tillich claims, is the symbol of resurrection: "Resurrection says mainly that the Kingdom of God includes all dimensions of being. The whole

³⁵ Tillich, *ST*, 3: 409.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

personality participates in Eternal Life. If we use the term 'essentialization,' we can say that man's psychological, spiritual, and social being is implied in his bodily being—and this is in unity with everything else that has being."³⁷ Far from melting individuality into a faceless Absolute, Tillich's doctrine of universal essentialization demands the eternity of the individual as individual since it is our concrete historicity that is eternalized.

But how is individuality to be maintained in spite of its identity in God? Tillich's answer is that, in grounding the polarities of life—in this case individuation and participation—the being of God is precisely the site of the reconciliation of this contradiction. "In Eternal Life the two poles are in perfect balance," says Tillich. "They are united in that which transcends their polar contrast: the divine centeredness, which includes the universe of powers of being without annihilating them into a dead identity. . . . Eternal Life is still life, and the universal centeredness does not dissolve the individual centers."³⁸ Far from introducing irreconcilable elements, Eternal Life is precisely the source of their harmony. It is only in existence, with its distortions and negativities, that individuality and participatory identity are conceptual opposites. Eternal Life, on the other hand, is life in the divine life, shared with all others as oneself.

The reconciliation of disparate realities in existence also provides a glimpse into the nature of eternity in relation to time. Most certainly Eternal Life is not endless time. But neither is it the bald negation of time. Instead, eternity "transcends, but also includes, our time."³⁹ In it, "Special moments of time are not separated from each other; presence is not swallowed by past and future; yet the eternal keeps the temporal within itself. Eternity is the transcendent unity of the dissected moments of existential time."⁴⁰ In eternity, existential time is, like being, united without reduction to a dead identity. Since past, present, and future modes are all *dynamically* present in the Now, it is possible to speak of those modes of empirical time being enjoyed as time. Eternity is not endless future without a final aim for it is both the dynamic unity of all time and the *telos* of history—the aim of all time.

³⁷ Ibid., 413. It is also in this context that Tillich allows for the positive use of the symbol of personal immortality. While denying that it can be *anthropologically* grounded (i.e., in an immortal soul), or that it should suggest an afterlife as endless duration, he admits its overall validity.

³⁸ Ibid., 401.; See McKelway, *The Systematic Theology of Paul Tillich*, 245.

³⁹ *The Systematic Theology of Paul Tillich*, 250.

⁴⁰ Tillich, *ST*, 1: 274.; "Reply to Criticism," 340.

ETERNAL LIFE AND THE CHRIST

At this stage in Tillich's account of Eternal Life, Christ remains conspicuously absent. It would be brazen indeed of him to make a claim to the Christian character of his theology with no account of salvation's relation to Christ. Tillich does indeed draw such a connection, though not in the most traditional manner but in a way that adds depth to those doctrines of his already expounded. Christ is not the source of our Eternal Life by virtue of his resurrection but that life which because of its historicity reconstitutes the Eternal Life of all.

Tillich's incarnation is not a God-to-man "metamorphosis" as per his reply to Ferré. There is no heavenly being to "descend." God *is* being-itself. The divide between spiritual beings (i.e., humans) and God is solely a split in their existent being from their essential being. Humans are essentially united with God, but existentially estranged. As such, the mediation of the Christ is mediation between essential and existential being. "New Being is essential being under the conditions of existence, conquering the gap between essence and existence,"⁴¹ says Tillich. "Jesus as the Christ is the bearer of the New Being *in the totality of his being*, not in any special expressions of it. It is his *being* that makes him the Christ because his being has the quality of New Being beyond the split of essential and existential being."⁴² Tillich rejects a two-natures Christology in favor of one which asserts that "in Jesus as the Christ, the eternal unity of God and man has become historical reality."⁴³ Christ is essential God-manhood actualized under the conditions of existence.

That Christ's person is of central importance immediately raises questions of the salvific efficacy of Christ's saving work. Atonement and entrance into Eternal Life are, however, already accounted for under the essence-existence-essentialization schema. Thus Tillich rejects a supernatural resurrection and judicial/sacrificial atonement as unnecessary addendums to what his doctrine of the incarnation has already taken into account. Resurrection and atonement are shifted from Christology to the doctrine of

⁴¹ ST, 2:118-19.

⁴² Ibid., 121. (My italics.)

⁴³ Ibid., 148. Tillich's debt to Schleiermacher in this formulation is clear: "[A]s a historical individual [the Redeemer] must have been at the same time ideal (i.e., the ideal must have become completely historical in Him), and each historical moment of His experience must at the same time have borne within it the ideal." Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 377.

God. It is the divine life in itself—apart from the incarnation—which is the source of Eternal Life and atonement. Existent being is essentialized in every moment, and it is essentialized as a whole. All being modifies the Eternal Life of each particular being. Christ's work, however, is his bearing of an essential divine-human unity into existence. Christ work is coterminous with his person.

Since Christ is perfectly existent and perfectly actualized essential being, he is also *perfectly* essentialized. Unlike any other being, Christ's life is *fully* taken into Eternal Life. He thus not only existentially expresses the eternal unity of God and humanity in history, but also uniquely constitutes the life of God as his historical existence is essentialized. The being of Christ is absolutely significant for Eternal Life. And since in Eternal Life all beings share in one another's essence, the Eternal Life of Christ has universal significance for the eternity of all others. It is in the universal essentialization of all being sharing in the essentialization of Christ that Tillich completes his account of "vicarious fulfillment."⁴⁴ Every life, no matter how evil or wasted, shares Eternal Life with the perfectly essentialized life of Christ. Christ's essentialized being is uniquely constitutive of Eternal Life, and as such it is of eternal significance for all other beings. And since Eternal Life is life in God, Christ's historical existence is absolutely significant for God's own life.

CONCLUSION

Tillich's doctrine of Eternal Life resembles traditional accounts in many respects.⁴⁵ Yet his innovations allow him to bypass many of the puzzles that troubled other thinkers. His elaboration of Schelling's essence-existence-essentialization scheme is particularly helpful in this respect. It allows him to hold to a non-supernatural account of Eternal Life without demanding an anthropologically grounded immortality. Eternal Life is a theological, and not an anthropological doctrine. Moreover, Tillich's thought allows for a robust yet non-supernatural account of the livingness of Christ, his historical ideality, and his absolute significance for the Eternal Life of all beings. Eternal Life is the same as all beings' in kind. In quality, however, there is an

⁴⁴ Tillich, *ST*, 3: 409.

⁴⁵ "It should now be clear that any attempt to disregard the transcendent dimension of Tillich's eschatology would be a flagrant distortion of his thought." Raymond F. Bulman, "Tillich's Eschatology of the Late American Period (1945-1965)," in *New Creation or Eternal Now?: Is There an Eschatology in Paul Tillich's Work?*, ed. Gert Hummel (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1991), 148.

infinite difference between the perfectly essentialized and all else. The confluence of his concept of ecstatic-naturalism and his Christology melds to form the crown of his account of Eternal Life: the doctrine of universal essentialization. This doctrine bridges two of the more trenchant positions in Christian theology by admitting a universalism, qualified by actual historical life, and yet where the person of Christ is still the final determiner of the destiny of all. The result is a doctrine of Eternal Life that is maximally meaningful in regard to historical existence without sacrificing the power and universality of divine grace. Every historical happening is significant for Eternal Life, but such meaning is not achieved at the expense of the goodness of God or the person and work of Christ. In this, Tillich's doctrine of Eternal Life surpasses that of many other theologians' in both its quality and its Christian character.

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THE RESURRECTION OF THE DEAD: A RELIGIONLESS INTERPRETATION

ADAM KOTSKO

The resurrection of the dead has often occupied an ambiguous place in Christian theology. On the one hand, the resurrection of Christ is regarded as the ultimate proof of his divinity and belief in the resurrection is one of the most frequent litmus tests for what counts as true Christianity. On the other hand, the resurrection of the dead can sometimes seem like an awkward footnote to Christian doctrine. It is a spectacular event associated with the end of time, but for all practical purposes, the tradition has been much more preoccupied with the fate of the individual's immortal soul.

Attempts to reconcile belief in the resurrection with belief in the immortality of the soul have generated considerable intellectual gymnastics. This perhaps indicates that the two doctrines are not a natural fit, and indeed many contemporary theologians of a more traditional bent have significantly de-emphasized the immortality of the soul in favor of the resurrection. Such approaches are often presented as a long-overdue return to the more originary truth of the gospel, but it cannot be denied that they also represent attempts to make Christian theology more relevant in an academic culture that is increasingly fascinated with the question of "the body."

Outside of academic circles, stances toward the resurrection have largely fallen into a familiar conservative-versus-liberal pattern. Conservatives emphasize "literal" belief in the resurrection, even though this is surely one of the most inapt possible designators for such a singular event. Meanwhile, liberals have tended to explain it in ways that are in danger of explaining it away—for instance, by claiming that the resurrection accounts are a later development and that the early communities simply had a firmly-held belief that Christ was somehow still with them. The goal of such liberal approaches to the resurrection is to return the focus where they believe it belongs: the moral edification to be derived from Christ's teachings.

In this essay, I would like to propose an alternative approach to the resurrection of the dead, using the methodology I have developed in my book *Politics of Redemption: The Social Logic of Redemption*.¹ I have called that methodology a social-relational one and—drawing on Bonhoeffer's prison

¹ Adam Kotsko, *Politics of Redemption: The Social Logic of Salvation* (New York: T&T Clark, 2010), esp. chaps. 1 and 8.

writings as well as the work of Dorothee Soelle—a religionless one. It is religionless insofar as it does not start with the framework of a transcendent God and an immortal soul and does not assume that biblical or theological texts require such a framework in order to be meaningful. It is social-relational insofar as it pushes beyond the irreducible individualism of that traditional paradigm and focuses on ways that biblical or theological texts speak to the *social* structure of human existence. In order to uncover a social-relational logic in the text, however, it is necessary to take it as a whole. Dismissing certain elements as mythological accretions to be explained away imposes an outside framework onto the text that proves just as counterproductive as presupposing the metaphysical framework of the soul and its God.

My test-case for this methodology was the vexed question of atonement theory—that is, of the various theological attempts to make sense of the nature and meaning of Christ’s saving work. An investigation of the classical articulations of atonement theory showed that they all rely on a fundamental connectedness among human beings. This fundamentally social structure of humanity allows Adam to create a problem that propagates itself to all human beings and similarly allows Christ to solve that problem in a way that is (at least potentially or in principle) equally universal in scope.

The earliest extended discussion of the resurrection of the dead in the New Testament holds out the promise that this theme will be similarly productive when approached from a social-relational or religionless perspective. I am speaking here of 1 Corinthians 15, where Paul insists on a radical inseparability between Christ’s resurrection and ours. This inseparability is visible in the very phrase “resurrection *from the dead*” (ἐκ νεκρῶν).² It is easy to treat this phrase as a quasi-jargonistic term, such that “from the dead” is a King James-style way of saying something like “from the grave,” but it is important to emphasize that the Greek term for “the dead” is plural here. A more expressive translation might say that Christ was raised “from among dead people” or “out of dead people.” The “resurrection of the dead” is not a general power that God possesses and has used in the particular case of Christ, but rather a universal event that Christ’s resurrection kicks off. He is the “first fruits of those who have died” (15:20), and his action will have as universal an effect as Adam’s propagation of

² 1 Cor. 5:12 (New Revised Standard Version). All biblical citations hereafter come from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) unless otherwise noted.

death (15:21-22). If Paul envisions any from among the dead being excluded from the resurrection, he does not mention such a possibility here—and that is fitting, given that such a possibility would conflict with Paul's repeated assertions that death will be utterly defeated (15:26, 54-57).

Paul equally ignores the possibility of an immortal soul surviving the body; instead, he puts forth a more complex account of continuity-in-discontinuity. Responding to a hypothetical question about the kind of body in which the dead will be raised (15:35), he first turns to the analogy of a seed, which is not yet what it will become (15:37-38). Paul emphasizes the diversity among the types of bodies that God has created, including the various types of flesh (15:39), and the contrast between earthly and heavenly bodies (15:40-41). The contrast between the "seed" of the mortal human body and the "plant" of the resurrected body is just as stark: "It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown an ensouled body [σῶμα ψυχικόν], it is raised a spiritual body [σῶμα πνευματικόν]" (15:42-44, translation altered). Paul repeats this contrast in terms of his first Adam/second Adam schema: "Thus it is written, 'The first man, Adam, became a living soul [ψυχὴν ζῶσαν]'; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit [πνεῦμα ζωοποιοῦν]" (15:45, translation altered). It is not clear exactly what Paul means by "soul" here, but he cannot possibly be putting forth the traditional "religious" view of the soul if the soul is aligned with the mortal body that is overcome through the resurrection.³

While Paul's account of the resurrection of Christ begins with an attempt to shore up the authority of the gospel message and those appointed to preach it (15:3-11), it almost immediately opens out onto broader reflections on the death-defeating, life-giving consequences of Christ's resurrection for *all* the dead. It emphasizes themes of human solidarity with no explicit attention to the metaphysical question of the immortal soul as a survival of individuality beyond bodily existence. While the end times play a significant role, the real payoff of the passage comes in the consequences of faith or trust in the resurrection for the community. This trust issues in a practice that anticipates the "life-giving spirit" that Christ as "first fruits of those who have died" has become (15:20).

The Gospel accounts are at first glance significantly different from Paul's theological meditation. All four trace a similar narrative with

³ In fact, the translators of the NRSV, undoubtedly in deference to that view, misleadingly render "πνευματικόν" as "physical."

relatively limited explicit theological elaboration. First, a group of women come to the tomb in order to attend to the body, but they are informed by some type of messenger or messengers that Jesus is risen. Jesus then appears personally to a gradually larger number of people, but soon ascends into heaven, having promised some form of future presence or empowerment to his disciples. This presence or empowerment is sometimes but not always identified with the Holy Spirit.

The four narratives differ significantly in details—such as the precise identities of the women who first come to the tomb, the number and nature of the messengers, the events associated with each appearance—and explicating all those differences is beyond the scope of this essay. Instead, looking at each Gospel account in turn according to the general scholarly consensus of their order of composition, I would like to focus on what one could call the structural differences among these narratives, the unique elements that make them more than trivial variations on a theme. As I will try to show, these structural differences, far from representing serious contradictions, actually allow each account to enrich in its own way the basic scheme found in Paul.

According to scholarly consensus, the oldest of the Gospel accounts of the resurrection is Mark.⁴ Like the rest of Mark's narrative, his resurrection account moves very quickly, and the common thread throughout this account is disbelief in the absence of miraculous signs. The women arrive to find the stone rolled away (16:3), and see a young man sitting in the tomb (16:4). The young man tells them Jesus has been raised and orders them to tell the disciples, but they are afraid and do not do so. Jesus then appears directly to one of the women, Mary Magdalene, who finally obeys and tells the others, but they do not believe her (16:9-11). He subsequently appears to two others, and they tell the others, who do not believe *them* (16:12-13). Finally, he appears to the disciples altogether, berates them for their lack of faith, and orders them to tell the whole world (16:14-16). Jesus promises them that signs will accompany their message: "[B]y using my name they will cast out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up snakes in their hands, and if they drink any deadly thing, it will not hurt them; they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover" (16:15-18). He is then immediately taken up to heaven (16:19), at which point the disciples obey and begin preaching, "while the Lord worked with

⁴ Given the uncertain state of the text, it seems the only practical way to proceed here is to follow the tradition and treat the "longer ending" (16:9-20) as a unit together with 16:1-8.

them and confirmed the message by the signs that accompanied it" (16:20).

The message here is clear: those who expect others to trust that something extraordinary has happened should also have something extraordinary about them. At the same time, it is noteworthy that Jesus appears to be trying to keep his direct appearances to an absolute minimum, at first appearing only to one person, then to two, and finally—visibly annoyed—to his disciples as a group. Taken together with the famous theme of the "messianic secret," this presents us with a savior who very much wants to take people's mind off of *him* as an individual. As soon as he jump-starts the movement by appearing to as small an inner circle as possible, he immediately ascends to heaven and begins helping them invisibly.

The signs that Jesus "worked with them" follow in this pattern of taking the focus off Jesus as a person—there is no sign of the cross, for instance, and no particular emphasis on baptism or other distinctively "Christian" rituals. Instead, the disciples put forth the content of his message. Casting out demons has been a priority all along, in keeping with Mark's emphasis on the defeat of Satan. In addition, when one takes into account the ways that the demon-possessed (most notably the Garasene demoniac of Mark 5) were cut off from human society, the ability to cast out demons and the ability to "speak new tongues" fit together as ways of expanding the circle of human fellowship. Similarly, certain types of highly symbolic invulnerabilities (to snakes and poison) highlight the disciples' fearlessness before death, while their healing abilities reflect the life-giving nature of the resurrection.

Matthew's account is significantly different, both in narrative details and in overall tone. Perhaps the most significant difference is that Jesus' resurrection is not the first resurrection mentioned—instead, immediately upon his death, the evangelist claims that "the tombs were also opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised" (27:52). What's more, these resurrected saints "came out of the tombs and entered the holy city and appeared to many" (27:53). Thus the first consequence of Jesus's death was the resurrection of *other people*, an occurrence that contradicts Paul's claim that Jesus was the first fruits from among the dead, yet neatly captures the logic of his overall argument.

When we turn to the resurrection account proper, it is clear that Matthew's version of the story has considerably more bombast than Mark's, with the earthquake and the dramatic appearance of the angel who rolls the stone away (28:2-3). Notably, however, the core reality is the same: the

women arrive to find Christ's body already gone. The moment of the resurrection itself is never depicted in either account—Matthew provides a more dramatic “reveal” than Mark, but the main event happened at some unknown time between his burial and the women's arrival without the guards or anyone else noticing it. The women and disciples all worship him, providing a clearer indication of his divine status than in Mark, but in contrast to the terrifying angel, Jesus's appearance goes unremarked. Furthermore, Matthew does not depict any post-resurrection miracles, not even the ascension into heaven. Nor does he promise that the disciples will be able to perform miraculous signs: he merely promises that he will be with them.

This notion of Jesus's presence is a theme common to Mark and Matthew. Notably absent here, however, is any explicit mention of the sending of the Holy Spirit in the sense familiar from the liturgical observation of Pentecost. Matthew associates the Holy Spirit with the commandment to baptize, yet in neither Matthew nor Mark (nor indeed Paul) is any particular connection drawn between Jesus's resurrection and the working or availability of the Holy Spirit. Instead, Jesus's presence—for which no specific mechanism is described—appears to play the empowering and emboldening role one normally associates with the Holy Spirit. Together with the fact that Paul depicts the resurrection body as a “life-giving spirit” (1 Cor. 15:45), this perhaps indicates that there was not initially a strong contrast between the resurrected Christ and a separate entity known as the Holy Spirit.

Luke's most significant structural innovation is to add a two-level frame within which Jesus' post-resurrection appearances occur. The first level of the frame is the explication of scripture, which includes within it a frame centered on the sharing of food. In the appearance to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, he first explicates scripture and then shares a meal (or at least begins to), while in his subsequent appearance to the main body of his disciples, he first shares a meal and then explicates scripture. In both cases, Jesus follows with the theme of moving the emphasis away from himself.

I will begin with the frame of sharing a meal. With the Emmaus road disciples, his identity remains unknown until he breaks bread with them (24:30-31), an act that traditional interpreters have associated with the Eucharist. With the other disciples, by contrast, he eats a piece of fish in order to demonstrate that he is not a ghost (24:34-42). The tradition has

tended to emphasize that the latter meal indicates that Jesus has been “literally” resurrected. If we take the two meals together, however, the “menu” is not that of the Eucharist, but rather of Jesus’s most famous miracle: the feeding of the five thousand. If I am correct that this miracle is Luke’s point of reference, then this account enacts a transition from Jesus as detached miracle worker (breaking the bread and promptly disappearing) to a *participant* in the miraculous feast (eating the piece of broken fish). From this perspective, the important thing about Jesus’s “literal” resurrection is not the way it demonstrates God’s transcendent power, but rather its portrayal of Jesus as *one of us*—indeed he is paradoxically even more “one of us,” in the sense of being less super-human, than before he died. Like Mark and Matthew, Luke is sparing in attributing miraculous signs to the resurrected Jesus (aside from ascending to heaven), so that he is strangely less impressive after rising from the dead than before. In fact, Jesus frequently appears to be just “some guy,” as in the encounter on the road to Emmaus.

The frame of scriptural interpretation works similarly. The explication of prophecy on the road to Emmaus serves to demonstrate that Jesus really was the Messiah, while his second hermeneutical exercise opens outwards to include the disciples’ mission: declaring “repentance and forgiveness of sins... to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem” (24:47). In contrast to the accounts of Mark and Matthew, the disciples will be empowered not by Jesus’ own presence, but by another entity known as the Holy Spirit—a distinction that is emphasized by the waiting period the disciples have to undergo after the ascension (24:49).

While the exact nature and status of the Holy Spirit is not explained in this account, it is clear that the shift in emphasis toward the Holy Spirit thus corresponds with a shift in agency toward the disciples rather than Jesus. The resurrection account at the beginning of Acts deepens this insight when the narrator claims that before being taken up to heaven, Jesus taught the apostles “through the Holy Spirit” (1:2). After a waiting period, the disciples then receive the Holy Spirit in a remarkable vision, which gave them the ability to speak foreign languages (2:1-4); later in Acts, the disciples perform all the signs promised in Mark and more. Acts thus presents Jesus as *also* empowered by the Holy Spirit in his post-resurrection teachings—the same Holy Spirit that will empower his disciples to carry on his mission and to do signs that, in Acts, are arguably even more impressive than Jesus’s own. The shift from Jesus’ earthly ministry to the ministry of the Holy Spirit has the effect of turning Jesus into a kind of “first among equals.”

The Gospel of John enacts the theme of displacing the interest from Jesus as a person in a unique way through its use of Jesus' intimate relationships. John has Mary Magdalene come to the tomb alone to find the stone rolled away (20:1), then stages an enigmatic race between Peter and the beloved disciple to be the first to see the empty tomb (20:2-10). The beloved disciple becomes the first to believe (20:8), while Mary is the first to see the resurrected Jesus. The presentation of this encounter is particularly intimate, as Jesus goes unrecognized until he calls Mary by name (20:16). Yet Jesus tells her "do not hold on to me" or "do not touch me" (Μή μου ἅπτον) and instructs her to tell the other disciples (20:17). What is important is not her personal attachment to Jesus, but furthering his mission.

The same theme recurs in the discussion of the beloved disciple after Jesus' reconciliation with Peter in chapter 21, when Peter asks whether the beloved disciple will remain alive until the end (21:20-21). What is noteworthy here is that Jesus does not indulge Peter's curiosity, basically declaring it none of his business (21:22). This leads to rumor-mongering among the disciples (21:23), but when the Evangelist seems to declare in conclusion that he is the beloved disciple, he too does not respond directly to the rumor. Instead, the Evangelist simply points to his own trustworthiness in witnessing the events related (21:24). Yet again, we can see that an excessive focus on Jesus as an individual—in this case, on the very special personal relationship that only the Gospel of John portrays—is inappropriate. Neither Jesus nor the beloved disciple dignifies Peter's curiosity or the disciples' rumor with a clear answer: the important thing is to follow Jesus—that is, to trust in the events related in the Gospel and act accordingly.

John also introduces a new perspective on the Holy Spirit. Later on the same day, Jesus appears to his disciples (20:19). After wishing them peace, he "showed them his hands and his side" (20:20), and the disciples "rejoiced when they saw the Lord" (20:21). Breaking with Luke's narrative, Jesus "breathed on them," telling them, "Receive the Holy Spirit" (20:22) and entrusting them with the power to forgive sins (or not). This incident is interesting for several reasons. First, it posits an extremely close bond between Jesus and the Holy Spirit, playing on the fact that the Greek πνεῦμα means both "spirit" and "breath." Secondly, it is worth noting that in the Gospel of John, the forgiveness of sins is not a significant part of Jesus' ministry. Even in the case of the woman caught in adultery, he merely refrains from condemning her (8:11), and the narrator is at pains to clarify that only Jesus' disciples baptized repentant sinners, not Jesus himself (4:2).

As in Luke, this is something of a “hand-off”: Jesus has fulfilled one part of a larger mission that the disciples must now continue in their own way.

Another interesting addition in John’s Gospel is the story of “doubting Thomas,” which like Jesus’ meal of fish in Luke is often put forward as proof of the importance of a “literal” resurrection. The agenda of Thomas, however, is not to verify that Jesus really has a body, but that he is really the one who was crucified: “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe” (20:25). When Jesus appears to him and invites him to perform his investigation (20:27), Thomas does not do so. Instead he immediately declares Jesus to be Lord and God (20:28), just as the other apostles believed upon seeing Jesus’s wounds. Jesus then declares, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe” (20:29), and the narrator declares that this sign—that is, Jesus’s appearance with his wounds from crucifixion—was chosen out of many others in order that the reader “may come to believe” (20:31). The most important sign of Jesus, then, is the demonstration that he really was the same Jesus who was crucified, a theme that dovetails nicely with Paul’s insistence on the solidarity of Christ with all those who have died.

After this brief investigation of the most important New Testament accounts, what can we say about the significance of the resurrection of the dead? It seems clear that it bears some relationship with eternal life, but the emphasis in Paul and even more so in the Gospels is on the availability of at least some anticipatory participation on that eternal life *here and now*. This participation is not premised on membership in a self-enclosed elite, but instead issues in a service that continually crosses boundaries—beyond the initial setting of Judaism, beyond the kinds of social divisions caused by differing languages and demon possession, and at the margins, even beyond the line between the living and the dead. Indeed, the resurrection even appears to actively confound this last boundary, as the resurrected Jesus still bears the marks of his death.

If we still must await the definitive defeat of death, trust in the resurrection allows us to live as those who no longer fear death. The tradition has tended to associate this boldness specifically with the Trinitarian person known as the Holy Spirit, but none of these New Testament accounts make such a clear distinction between Jesus and the Spirit. Paul seems to identify the resurrected Christ as a “life-giving spirit” (1 Cor. 15:45) but the logic of his argument dictates that that is what we will also become. The Gospel

accounts, in turn, express different aspects of this basic logic. Mark and Matthew emphasize Jesus's presence and his continuing role in empowering his disciples. Drawing on the resources of the Greek language, John presents the "Spirit" as the "breath" of the same Jesus who has just proven that he is the crucified one who is now risen. Luke-Acts, meanwhile, puts forth the Holy Spirit as a broader reality in which Jesus and his disciples equally, though differently, participate. The Holy Spirit cannot be separated from Jesus because the Holy Spirit names the immediate consequence of trust in the resurrection, a general resurrection that Jesus has inaugurated. Thus, some of these accounts can claim that the Holy Spirit somehow "is" Jesus, or even directly identify the function of the Holy Spirit with Jesus, without naming any separate entity. Yet what is the Holy Spirit if it is not *simply* Jesus?

In a religionless approach, we cannot presuppose either the metaphysical framework of the transcendent God and the immortal soul or the Trinitarian orthodoxy that attempted to square the gospel message with that framework, and so we cannot say much about what the Holy Spirit is in itself, at least not with much confidence. All we can definitively say is that the Holy Spirit is *us*. I do not mean this in the Hegelian sense whereby Christ is resurrected as the *Geist* of the Church as an institution, but in the sense that the Holy Spirit's only concrete existence, as portrayed in the Gospels, is in the work of those who trust in the resurrection. This *us* is defined by its relationship to Jesus, but not limited by it. Indeed, it is just the opposite: insofar as our relationship to Jesus empowers us to overcome the fear of death, it emboldens us to reach out to all we meet.

The *us* that the Holy Spirit is allows us to anticipate the day when we will be able to say *us* in the broadest and most all-inclusive way. Jesus remains an indispensable point of reference, yet the Gospel accounts leave us with the impression that, to paraphrase John the Baptist's statement from John 3:30, "Jesus must become lesser, we must become greater." From a religionless perspective, we can see that Jesus did not come so that we could become Christians, but so that we could become *us*, in the most powerful sense of the word—an *us* that is constitutively open, continually transgressing every boundary, even and especially the boundary that sets *us* off from others.

This is the account of the resurrection that a religionless approach gives us access to. Yet some readers may be wondering whether this scheme really requires us to *reject* the traditional framework of the transcendent God

and the immortal soul.⁵ Might it not be safer to harvest the insights of a religionless approach and incorporate them into a more traditional view? For instance, one might say that while the emphasis is clearly on the resurrection of the *body*, nothing in these passages explicitly excludes the notion of an immortal soul that survives death. Yet how is the notion of a soul that can never die compatible with the crossing of the boundaries between life and death that we see in resurrection? Resurrection is certainly an overcoming of death, but it is far from an exclusion of it—after all, Jesus still carries the marks of his death on his resurrected body. And what sense can Jesus’—and, by extension, our—solidarity with the dead make if the dead are not really dead? Indeed, I would argue that the traditional concept of the soul—that hard core of individuality that is in the last analysis impervious to any influence aside from its own free will—is incompatible with anything but the most superficial kind of solidarity.

A potentially more serious question arises in connection with the necessity to reject the transcendent God: who but a transcendent, all-powerful God could perform a miracle as profound as the resurrection? These accounts may emphasize the consequences of the resurrection for human agency, but don’t they logically presuppose an act of God? To this I would reply that it does require an act of God, but not necessarily a *transcendent* God, nor indeed a purely *miraculous* act of God. The notion of a miracle implies that God is somehow violating the laws of nature, yet Paul is able to present the resurrection through the naturalistic metaphor of planting seeds—and more generally, to portray the resurrection as God’s ultimate goal for all of creation. The resurrection is certainly amazing and unanticipated from a human perspective, but to view it as the miraculous act of a transcendent God implies an inviolable boundary between God and creation, one that can only be crossed in one direction. Why should this one boundary remain pristine and unaffected amid the proliferation of transgressions the resurrection inaugurates?

One can also come at this question from another direction: how could one say all we have said about the resurrection and then maintain that the power of resurrection must be something God and God alone possesses? The resurrection is not the kind of power that can be “possessed,” and in fact, one of its defining signs is breaking people free from “possession” by

⁵ In the discussion that follows, I am deeply indebted to Daniel Colucciello Barber’s remarks on an earlier draft of this essay.

demons. The first fruits of the resurrection was Jesus, “who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited [ἄρπαγμὸν]” (Phil. 2:6)—and what is a possession if not something seized in order to be exploited? Further, the agent of Jesus’ resurrection is very often identified precisely as the Holy Spirit whose movement the resurrection inaugurates (e.g., Rom. 1:4), reflecting a strange time-warp logic that challenges any straightforward notion of agency.

The resurrection is undoubtedly divine, but it is an out-going of the divine with the goal of making us divine in just that out-going way. We must never imagine that we possess the power of resurrection, lest we become something completely contrary to the *us* the resurrection seeks to make us. The way to prevent that is not, however, to keep the possession of the resurrection safely in the hands of a transcendent God, which would paradoxically enshrine possession as what is holiest and best. To become the *us* the resurrection that calls us to be, we must give up on possessing the resurrection, on possessing faith, on possessing the Holy Spirit, and above all, on possessing *us*—not because God actually possesses all those things in a way that excludes us, but because being *us* excludes any possession whatsoever.

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TOWARD AN ESCHATOLOGY OF HOPE: THE DISAPPEARANCE OF THE SEA IN REVELATION 21:1 AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE FOR THE CHURCH

MATTHEW P. O'REILLY

John's vision of the disappearance of the sea in Revelation 21:1 has been the occasion for a variety of proposals attempting to explain the meaning of the eschatological event.¹ Few commentators take the disappearance of the sea to be the actual removal of a literal sea.² Instead, most believe the disappearance of the sea should be interpreted symbolically. The question then is: what is symbolized by the sea and implied by its disappearance?

A number of proposals have been given in answer to this question. G. B. Caird suggests that John's perception of the sea is informed by myth and that the sea that vanishes in Rev. 21:1 is the cosmic sea out of which the first heaven and the first earth were made. This primeval sea is the home of the sea monster and is the object of God's conquest, though its endurance into the first heaven and earth is a symbol of God's as yet incomplete victory and incomplete sovereignty.³ Robert Mounce sees as more plausible a view of the sea as that which is at variance with the character of the new creation.⁴ David E. Aune understands the disappearance of the sea to reflect the ancient

¹ I am grateful to Dr. Robert Mulholland and Dr. Fredrick Long, both of Asbury Theological Seminary, for their extensive and detailed feedback on early drafts of this paper. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 2008 annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in a section titled, "John's Apocalypse and Cultural Contexts Ancient and Modern. I am also grateful to the members of that section who asked probing questions and provided helpful feedback.

² J. Webb Mealy takes the disappearance of the sea to be the literal removal of the heavenly sea that is the barrier between the heavenly realm of God and the earthly realm resulting in a new state in which the presence of God is no longer hidden from humanity. Mealy, *After the Thousand Years: Resurrection and Judgment in Revelation* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992), 192-212. Cf. G. K. Beale's critique: "This notion is based on a too literal view of the sea in the sky and on undemonstrated deductions from a series of possibly related texts in the Apocalypse." Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Text Commentary, ed. J. Howard Marshall and Donald A. Hagner (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1999), 1043.

³ G. B. Caird, *The Revelation of St. John the Divine* (London: A&C Black, 1966), 262.

⁴ Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, rev. ed., New International Commentary on the New Testament, ed. Ned B. Stonehouse, F.F. Bruce, and Gordon D. Fee (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1997), 381.

Israelite tradition of antipathy between Yahweh and the sea.⁵ G. K. Beale takes the sea in Rev. 21:1c to be a general summary of the various symbolic associations of sea language in Revelation, though he singles out as especially important the association of the sea with tribulation for God's people, the threat of which is removed from the new creation.⁶

This essay follows those who have argued for a symbolic interpretation of the sea's disappearance and aims to shed light on our understanding of the disappearance of the sea by placing it within the context of Old Testament and late Jewish apocalyptic literature in which the sea was regularly associated with: (1) evil power hostile to creation and a foe over which Yahweh is sovereign, (2) the source of the powers which oppress the people of God, and (3) that which stands in the way of Yahweh's deliverance of his people at the exodus. After surveying Jewish symbolism associated with the sea, we will be prepared to consider sea language in Revelation. In the course of this study, it will become clear that the use of sea language in Revelation closely parallels usage in other Jewish literature. It will become further evident that the elimination of the sea represents an event in which the people of God and the entire created order are liberated from all evil and hostile powers, not least death itself. After considering the Jewish context of sea language and its disappearance in Revelation, I will conclude the essay with a reflection on the significance of the sea's disappearance for the contemporary Church in light of present-day interest in end-time events and doomsday predictions. Against such prevailing eschatological pessimism, I will propose three tasks essential to the recovery of a hopeful eschatology. Having now traced the approach and plan of the essay, we are prepared to consider thalassic symbolism in the Old Testament and Jewish apocalyptic literature.

THE SEA IN THE OLD TESTAMENT AND JEWISH LITERATURE

In the Old Testament the sea is often portrayed as a power hostile both to creation and to the people of God. In Ps. 104:5-9 the water is portrayed as fleeing from Yahweh upon his rebuke. Yahweh is said to set up boundaries around the water as a means of protecting creation from the hostile waters.⁷

⁵ David E. Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, World Bible Commentary, ed. Bruce Metzger et al. (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 1119.

⁶ Beale, *Revelation*, 1041-1042.

⁷ Cf. Gen. 1:2-10; 8:1-14. Hereafter, all OT citations will be from the NRSV unless otherwise noted.

Similarly, Hebrew literature sometimes portrayed the sea as Yahweh's foe.⁸ In Job 7:12, Job makes use of sea language to reflect on God's apparent opposition to him as experienced in his affliction and suffering, "Am I the Sea...that you set a guard over me". The same motif appears in the Psalms where God rebukes the sea and delivers the psalmist who compares his rescue from his enemies to being lifted out of mighty waters (18:15-27).⁹ The psalmist praises God for his sovereignty over the mighty waters in 29:1-3¹⁰ and glories in Yahweh's power over the sea and its monsters (74:13-14). He also speaks of the waters as being fearful of Yahweh (77:16). Again, the psalmist praises God saying, "You rule the raging sea, when its waves rise, you still them" (89:9). Yahweh's opposition to the sea appears in Jeremiah as well where he is said to have, "placed the sand as a boundary for the sea, a perpetual barrier that it cannot pass; though the waves toss, they cannot prevail, though they roar, they cannot pass over it" (5:22). In Jer. 51:43-44, the king of Babylon is compared to the sea once again associating the sea with the enemy of God and of his people.¹¹ Yahweh's hostility towards the sea also appears in Nah. 1:4 where, "He rebukes the sea and makes it dry," and Hab. 3:8 where he is said to, "rage against the sea" (NRSV). *1 En.* 101:7 portrays the power of Yahweh over the seas by saying of the seas that, "At his rebuke they become frightened."¹² Yahweh's sovereignty over the sea is further illustrated by his ability to use it for his own purposes as celebrated in the song of Moses when the Israelites praise Yahweh for casting the Egyptian army into the sea (Ex. 15:1-19). So, even though the sea is regularly seen as Yahweh's foe, it is not beyond his power to use the sea for

⁸ Cf. Dave Matthewson, "New Exodus as a Background for 'The Sea Was No More' in Revelation 21:1c," *Trinity Journal* 24, 2 (2003): 245.

⁹ Cf. Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1-50*, Word Bible Commentary, ed. Bruce Metzger et al. (Waco, TX: Word, 1983), 174. Craigie suggests that these verses are "reminiscent of the Exodus and the Reed Sea deliverance" (174).

¹⁰ For an extended analysis of the conflict between Yahweh and the sea in Ps. 29 see Carola Kloos, *Yhwh's Combat with the Sea: A Canaanite Tradition in the Religion of Ancient Israel* (Leiden, NL: Brill, 1986), 15-93.

¹¹ It is interesting that while Babylon and her king are here compared to the sea (Jer. 51:34-37), the sea is also said to have risen over Babylon covering her with its waves (51:42). It seems that the tides had turned on Babylon, so to speak. Cf. Gerald L. Keown, Pamela J. Scalise, and Thomas G. Smothers, *Jeremiah 26-52*, Word Bible Commentary, ed. Bruce Metzger et al. (Waco: Word, 1995), 371.

¹² *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha: Apocalyptic Literature and Testaments*, 2 vols., ed. James H. Charlesworth (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983), 82.

his own purposes.¹³

The sea is also seen as being the home of hostile and bestial forces. In Isa. 27:1 the sea is the home of Leviathan, the beast described as a serpent and a dragon.¹⁴ The prophet is here anticipating the day when God will kill this sea dragon. The larger context of this chapter is the hope for return from exile. That same day of return will be the day when, "those who were lost in the land of Assyria and those who were driven out to the land of Egypt will come and worship the Lord on the holy mountain at Jerusalem" (Isa. 27:13). The elimination of the hostile forces from the sea is thus associated with the return from exile and the restoration of the people of God.¹⁵

Another text which portrays the sea as the source of bestial oppression of the people of God is Dan. 7:2-8, a text the importance of which for our thesis cannot be overstated. In these verses Daniel sees four different beasts coming up out of the sea. His descriptions of these beasts go into terrifying detail. The first beast resembles a lion with eagle's wings (7:4) while the second resembles a bear with tusks (7:5). The third beast resembles a leopard with four heads and four wings (7:6). The image of the fourth and final beast is even more horrific than the previous three. Daniel says of this fourth beast that it is, "terrifying and dreadful and exceedingly strong. It had great iron teeth and was devouring, breaking in pieces, and stamping what was left with its feet...and it had ten horns" (7:7).¹⁶ An angel interprets this vision to Daniel telling him that the four beasts are four kings that will arise (7:14). Being the place from where the beasts come, the sea is portrayed as the source of terrifying and oppressive powers which represent the rule of

¹³ The defeat of the Egyptian army is a particularly striking, if not ironic, event. As that which stood in the way of Israel's escape, the sea symbolized to them defeat at the hands of their enemies. There may also be a sense in which the sea is perceived as a symbol of Yahweh's betrayal of his people, or perhaps his inability to deliver them, who complain that they have been brought into the wilderness only to die there (Ex. 14:10-12). However, Yahweh demonstrated his power to rescue and redeem his people by taking that which was thought to be Israel's doom, namely the sea, using it for his own purposes to deliver his people and destroy their enemies. That which was thought to spell certain death was transformed by Yahweh into the instrument of their victory. It is also noteworthy that the sea, which was the barrier to Israel's safety, was used by Yahweh for his glory (Ex. 14:17-18).

¹⁴ In Rev. 13:9 dragon and serpent are used to describe the Satan.

¹⁵ Cf. John N. Oswalt, *Isaiah 1-39*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament, ed. R.K. Harrison and Robert L. Hubbard (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1986), 501.

¹⁶ By the first century, the fourth beast of Daniel's vision was interpreted as the Roman Empire (cf. *4 Ezra* 11-12).

antagonistic foreign kingdoms over the people of God.¹⁷

As seen briefly above, the image of the sea sometimes recalls Yahweh's deliverance of Israel at the Red Sea and suggests the hope of a future rescue of the people of God. In Isa. 51:10, God is praised as the one, "who dried up the sea, the waters of the great deep; who made the depths of the sea a way for the redeemed for to cross over" (NRSV). The sea is portrayed as that which stands between the people of God and their redemption from slavery in Egypt. John Oswalt suggests that the Red Sea "seemed to say that God was indeed not able to keep his promises to his people."¹⁸ So when the Lord does away with the sea he is eliminating that which stands in the way of the redemption and freedom of his people.¹⁹ Isa. 51:11 follows with the promise of a new exodus in which God's ransomed people return to Zion with everlasting joy. Sorrow and sighing are said to flee away and are perhaps intended to be associated with the receding waters of the sea. This text is especially significant for our purposes given the idea of the sea being, "dried up," perhaps suggesting that the disappearance of the sea in Rev. 21:1c is to be taken as an image of a new exodus where creation is finally delivered from chaotic and hostile forces. Isaiah also compares the wicked to the sea seeing it as a place where there is no peace and saying that, "[T]he wicked are like the tossing sea that cannot keep still; its waters toss up mire and mud. There is no peace, says my God, for the wicked" (57:20-21, NRSV).

We have seen, then, that the image of the sea in ancient Jewish literature can be organized generally into at least three categories. First, the sea is seen as Yahweh's hostile foe against which he goes to war and rebukes setting up boundaries around it in order to protect his people and sometimes even sovereignly using the sea to accomplish their salvation. The chaotic power of the sea is sometimes even directed by Yahweh against the enemies of his people. Second, the sea is thought of as the home of the great sea monster and symbolizes the source of beastly powers manifest historically in kingdoms which oppress the people of God. Third, the image of the sea and its removal is associated with the exodus event which looks back to God's

¹⁷ For a discussion of 'representation' in Jewish apocalyptic, especially as it relates to Dan. 7, see N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992), 289-297.

¹⁸ John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah 40-66*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament, ed. R.K. Harrison and Robert L. Hubbard (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998), 342.

¹⁹ Cf. Ex. 14.

deliverance of his people at the Red Sea and forward to a future event where God brings ultimate redemption to his people and to creation as a whole. It is important to note, of course, that not every mention of the sea in Hebrew literature has symbolic associations. Sometimes the sea is simply the sea.²⁰ However, there is sufficient evidence to conclude that the sea often symbolizes evil and oppressive power over which Yahweh is always portrayed as sovereign being fully able to deliver his people from its threat.

THE SEA IN REVELATION

Having surveyed the symbolic associations with the sea in ancient Hebrew literature, we are prepared to look in detail at the sea language in Revelation. The image of the sea (θάλασσα) first appears in John's vision of the heavenly throne room in Rev. 4:6 where, "before the throne [there is] as a sea of glass like crystal."²¹ It is important to note that it is not clear exactly what John is seeing here. The dual use of both the comparatives ὥς and ὅμοιος emphasize the simile that John is using to describe what he saw. This emphatic use of simile strongly points to the symbolic nature of John's vision of this glassy sea-like object and invites the one who reads and those who hear to consider the sea's symbolic significance. It is not specifically a sea, but it is very much like one, and our above survey suggests that a first century Jewish hearer may here associate the sea symbolically with evil or antagonism.²² This is strengthened by the position of the sea in relation to the throne. The sea is ἐνώπιον, or before, the throne which may indicate God's sovereignty over the sea, which, as we have seen, is a common theme in Jewish literature.²³

G.K. Beale also suggests that there may be an allusion to the Red Sea here.²⁴ This is supported by the use of the identical phrase ὥς θάλασσαν

²⁰ E.g. Gen. 9:2; 14:3; Ex. 15:22; 23:31; Num. 13:29; 14:25; 21:4; 33:10; Jos. 1:4; 1 Kg. 5:9.

²¹ Cf. Ez. 1:22. Also, θάλασσα appears more often in the Apocalypse than the length of this essay will permit me to address. I have chosen those occurrences which are most relevant to the thesis of this essay.

²² Cf. Caird, *Revelation*, 65-68.

²³ G.K. Beale suggests that there is, "a strong hint that John now sees the chaotic powers of the sea as calmed by the Lamb who has slain the dragon in the sea, bringing about cosmic peace." Beale, "The Problem of the Man from the Sea in IV Ezra 13 and its Relation to the Messianic Concept in John's Apocalypse," *Novum Testamentum* 25, 2 (1983): 187. For the use of the preposition ἐνώπιον see M. Robert Mulholland, *Revelation: Holy Living in an Unholy World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990), 149ff.

²⁴ G.K. Beale, *Revelation*, 327.

ύαλίνην ("as a sea of glass") in 15:2 where those who conquered the beast are singing the song of Moses and the song of the lamb (15:3). This suggestion is compatible with the idea of the evil character of the sea within the Jewish pool of imagery. We may conclude tentatively, then, that this first appearance of the sea in Revelation images the sovereignty of God over the forces of evil.²⁵

One of the most important texts for understanding the image of the sea in the Apocalypse is 13:1-2 where John records:

And I saw a beast coming up from the sea (θάλασσα) having ten horns and seven heads and upon it's horns ten diadems and upon its heads blasphemous names. And the beast which I saw was like a leopard, and its feet were as a bear's, and its mouth was as a lion's mouth. And the dragon gave to it his power and his throne and great authority.

The similarity of this passage to Daniel 7 should be quite clear. Some have suggested that this is Daniel's fourth beast and that it is to be identified specifically with the Roman Empire.²⁶ However, it should be observed that this beast appears to be an amalgamation of the beasts in Dan. 7. The beast in Revelation 13:1 is like a leopard which corresponds to Daniel's third beast (7:6). It has the feet of a bear corresponding to Daniel's second beast (7:5). It has the mouth of a lion corresponding to Daniel's first beast (7:4). And, finally, it has ten horns corresponding to Daniel's fourth beast (7:8). Thus, the beast of Rev 13:1 should be seen as a combination of all that the beasts of Dan. 7 represent. Rather than identifying this beast with a single kingdom, Roman or other, this beast should be thought of as a manifestation of evil and an incarnation of the dragon's power from which this beast derives its authority. Certainly John's original hearers would have seen the Roman

²⁵ Less likely is Robert Mounce's suggestion that, "apart from heightening the sense of God's separateness from his creatures, [the sea] has no special significance." Mounce, *Revelation*, 123. While the presence of the shining object like a crystal sea may emphasize God's transcendence, the evil connotations of the sea in Jewish literature and, as we shall see, the importance of the sea in Revelation make it unlikely that this image carries no special significance.

²⁶ Caird, *Revelation*, 162-63. Ben Witherington, *Revelation*, New Cambridge Bible Commentary, ed. Ben Witherington et al. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 181.

Empire as their contemporary manifestation of this beast's power. However, as Robert Wall points out, this beast is best understood, "as a universal symbol for secular power and cultural idols, with historical counterparts in every age."²⁷

Of particular importance is that this beast arises from the sea. This evil incarnation finds its source in the sea. The close similarity with Dan. 7 strengthens the argument that John is working with the basic Jewish concept of the sea as being the home or source of evil. This beast is the enemy of God that utters blasphemies against God (13:6) and acts on behalf of the dragon (13:2). If there was any doubt that the mention of the sea in Rev. 4:6 symbolized evil, it should be erased with this vision. The beast from the sea is the incarnation of that which the sea stands for, namely, evil, oppression, and rebellion against God.

The "sea of glass" appears again in Rev. 15:2. As noted above, this occurrence carries connotations of a new exodus event. That those who conquered the beast are singing "the song of Moses" (15:3) confirms the exodus imagery.²⁸ Further, "the ones who conquered the beast and its image and the number of its name" are now "standing upon the glassy sea" (15:2). This is an image of victory over the evil which is represented by both the beast and the sea. It is significant that the sea is "mixed with fire" (15:2). Beale notes that in the Apocalypse fire is a symbol of judgment.²⁹ Thus, like the original exodus event, this image of those who conquer standing atop the sea of glass mixed with fire contains the image of judgment against evil and the enemies of God as well as an image of the victory of the people of God over their oppressors.

In chapters 19 and 20 there appears for the first time the phrase, "lake of fire" (19:20).³⁰ In 19:20 the beast and the false prophet are thrown living into the lake of fire. Later, after the thousand year period (20:7), Satan (20:10) and Death and Hades (20:14) are thrown into the lake of fire. There appears to be a development in Revelation from a sea of glass (4:6) to a sea of glass mixed with fire (15:2) to a lake of fire (19:20).³¹ That the sea of glass as a symbol for evil has experienced the judgment of God in being initially

²⁷ Robert W. Wall, *Revelation*, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), 168.

²⁸ Beale, *Revelation*, 789.

²⁹ Ibid. Cf. Rev. 20:9

³⁰ Cf. Rev. 20:10, 14-15.

³¹ Cf. Mulholland, *Revelation*, 304.

mixed with fire and then finally becoming a lake of fire images God's ultimate judgment against evil. This lake then becomes the final realm of all who oppose God and rebel against him (20:15). Chapter 20 contains another indicator that the sea is associated with evil, death, and rebellion against God. It is said that, "the sea gave up the dead in it and Death and Hades gave up the dead in them" (20:13). The parallelism here unmistakably associates the sea with Death and Hades.³²

Up to this point in the Apocalypse we have seen that the image of the sea corresponds closely to the image of the sea in other ancient Jewish literature where the sea is a symbol of evil over which God is sovereign (4:6) and the source of the beastly powers which war against God and his people (13:1-2). We have also seen that the image of the sea in Revelation corresponds to Old Testament literature in that it carries the connotations of a new exodus event (15:2). Further, the sea is the place of God's judgment against evil (15:2; 19:20; 20:13, 14, 15) and is associated with Death and Hades (20:13).

We come now to the chief passage in question. Revelation 21 begins with John's description of the new creation: "I saw a new heaven and a new earth. For the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea is no more" (21:1). What, then, is the meaning and significance of the disappearance of the sea in this vision of new creation? Given the evidence that sea symbolizes evil and opposition to God, I propose that the disappearance of the sea means that all evil, all that oppresses the people of God, and every manifestation of rebellion against God has been removed from creation.³³ That the disappearance of the sea is the removal of all that is antithetical to full human existence is confirmed by the chiasmic structure of 21:1-5a:

³² Cf. Richard Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation*, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993), 68; Caird, *Revelation*, 260; Mulholland, *Revelation*, 312. Against Mounce, who argues that, "John mentions the sea, death, and Hades all giving up their dead to indicate and emphasize the universal scope of judgment. The sea is specifically mentioned to show that no one – not even those whose bodies had gone unburied because lost at sea – would escape resurrection and judgment." Cf. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 377.

³³ Cf. Caird, *Revelation*, 262.

A¹: new sky and new earth (1a)

B¹: first sky and first earth have passed away (1b)

C¹: the sea is no longer (1c)

D¹: new Jerusalem as a bride (2)

D²: dwelling of God with his bride (3)

C²: death, sorrow, crying, and pain are no longer (4a-c)

B²: the first things have passed away (4d)

A²: all things are made new (5a).

The parallel between C¹ and C² indicate that the removal of the sea is to be seen as the removal of death, sorrow, crying, and pain from the created order.³⁴ Everything that is opposed to the people of God and contributes to their oppression is excluded. This interpretation fits comfortably within the larger contexts of Old Testament literature and other Jewish apocalyptic texts surveyed above.

John may also intend his audience to hear in Rev. 21:1-5a an echo of Isa. 51:10-11 where the drying of the sea and the anticipation of a new exodus is associated with the doing away of sorrow and sighing.³⁵ This corresponds to the idea that the sea in Revelation is associated with the new exodus event in 15:1-3 where those who conquer the beast stand atop the glassy sea mixed with fire and sing the song of Moses and the song of the Lamb. Thus, the disappearance of the sea in 21:1c suggests that the new exodus event has indeed taken place and that the people of God have passed beyond the threat which the sea represents to final redemption, salvation, and fellowship with God (21:3).³⁶

It is important to note that in Revelation, as in the Old Testament, the sea does not always carry symbolic connotations of evil and antagonism. However, the image of the sea in Revelation does fit well within the broader context of Jewish literature where the sea is often portrayed as antithetical to God's purposes and as the source of the bestial oppression of the people of God. The image of the sea in Revelation also echoes God's deliverance of his people at the Red Sea as well as the anticipation of a future final deliverance of his people. Revelation also, like other Jewish literature, always portrays

³⁴ Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, 1114; Beale, *Revelation*, 1042; Matthewson, "New Exodus," 245; Wall, *Revelation*, 244.

³⁵ Cf. Isa. 27:13.

³⁶ Matthewson takes this to be the primary idea in 21:1c. See Matthewson, "New Exodus," 257-58.

God as sovereign over the sea and the evil that it represents.

This understanding of the symbolism associated with the sea suggests that the disappearance of the sea in Rev. 21:1c is a symbol of the elimination of all that is antithetical to God's purposes and God's people. This is consistent with other Jewish Apocalyptic texts where the disappearance of the sea corresponds to the removal of evil and the restoration of the people of God.

Further, in that the beast of Rev. 13:1 comes out of the sea, the disappearance of the sea indicates that all sources of oppression are removed from the created order. The idea of God's sovereignty over the sea, and, therefore, evil was also introduced in Rev. 4:6 and indicates that the elimination of the sea should be seen as a demonstration of God's ultimate sovereignty over evil and disorder. The chiasmic structure of Rev. 21:1-5a confirms that the elimination of the sea is equivalent to the elimination of evil in the removal of death, sorrow, crying, and pain from the created order. This echoes Isa. 51:10-11 which looks forward to a new exodus event and the removal of sorrow and sighing from the people of God. The idea of a new exodus is strengthened by the imagery of Rev. 15:1-3 where the conquerors stand upon the sea and sing the song of Moses. None of these elements should be singled out to the neglect of the others. Rather, the elimination of the sea symbolizes the fulfillment of the Jewish expectation of God's final doing away with evil and the full redemption of his people.

TOWARD AN ESCHATOLOGY OF HOPE

We have seen that, when read in light of Jewish apocalyptic literature, the disappearance of the sea in Rev 21:1 paints a symbolic picture of a day to be longed for, a day when God will remove from the created order all that is evil and antithetical his purposes and to his people, a day when creation will emerge from its sorrow into the bliss of God's manifest presence. This is a day of hope, and in the Apocalypse of John, it is that day for which the faithful around the throne and upon the earth await with eagerness. And yet, we live in a day when much of the church is highly influenced by the anti-creational theology of the best-selling Left Behind series.³⁷ Many Christians have been thrice duped by the triply-failed doomsday predictions of Harold Camping. Even more recently, Pat Robertson pointed to the August 23, 2011,

³⁷ For a full-scale critique of the so-called rapture theology of the Left Behind series see Barbara R. Rossing, *The Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation* (New York: Basic Books, 2004).

earthquake in Washington, DC, as sign of God's coming judgment.³⁸ It would seem that bookstores and the airwaves are seldom short of end-times paranoia and pessimism.³⁹ Such well-known and highly publicized eschatological is damaging to the Church in its poor handling of scripture and the unnecessary mockery that comes when Camping-like predictions fail to be realized. The remedy to this problem is for the Church to articulate a thoroughly biblical eschatology of hope with an optimistic view of the future that God will draw the nations to himself and one day bring full and final renewal to all that he has made. The question before us then is this: In light of the scriptural vision of new creation, how do we regain an eschatology of hope? In an effort to move toward such eschatological renewal, I propose three essential tasks. These three are certainly not intended as an exhaustive list but as key elements necessary for the stated goal.

First, if we are to have a firmly biblical eschatology of hope, we must recover a clear theology of the goodness of creation and of God's commitment to his creation. We can be thankful that this very thing is taking place in various locales, but it does not appear to have taken hold as expansively as it must.⁴⁰ Two sub-points of this recovery are worth mention here. The first is how we conceive of the biblical metanarrative, the over-arching story of the Bible that both begins and ends in a garden of God's own making. The images in Revelation 21-22 call to mind God's original creation, not least in terms of the tree of life. The human plight is solved when access to the tree of life is regained at the end of the Apocalypse. We need to recover the biblical narrative that tells of God's good creation, the corrupting effects of human sin, and the work of Christ to restore not only individuals, which he certainly does, but the creation as a whole, bringing resurrected humanity into the new garden and to the tree of life. The second sub-point to the first task involves the way we understand the Incarnation. I've already indicated that a hopeful eschatology must affirm the cosmic scope of Christ's

³⁸ Elizabeth Tenety, "Pat Robertson: D.C. earthquake 'means we're closer to the coming of the Lord'," *The Washington Post*, September, 25, 2011, http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/under-god/post/pat-robertson-dc-earthquake-means-were-closer-to-the-coming-of-the-lord/2011/08/25/gIQAskIEeJ_blog.html.

³⁹ This is not to say that there are not some quarters of the Christian Church where a firmly hopeful eschatology is advocated and maintained. There certainly are. See Keith A. Mathison, *Postmillennialism: An Eschatology of Hope* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1999).

⁴⁰ J. Matthew Sleeth, *Serve God, Save the Planet: A Christian Call to Action* (White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green, 2006).

redemptive work, and in that light the event that is the Incarnation becomes God's unmistakable affirmation of the goodness of what he has made. He comes not to walk on the earth simply to be done with it. He comes to announce his love for what he has made and to affirm the goodness of the world that is the work of his hand.

Second, if we are to have an eschatology of hope, we must recover the language given in scripture to speak of the future. This involves the positive task of defining our terms and using them in a way faithful to the intent of the biblical authors. The opening verses of Revelation 21 provide some help. The Christian hope is not the ethereal "sweet by and by"; it is concretely the new heavens and the new earth, where God makes his dwelling. We must be distinctly clear that we are not merely passing through and that this earth is indeed our home. Further, God intends to make his own home here bringing with his presence freedom from all that is antithetical to the good world that he has made and eternal to his people who dwell in it. We must recover the language of the second coming and the consummation from the popular distortion that it is a secret event wherein the faithful are snatched away while the world and everyone in it have wrath and destruction sent down upon them.⁴¹ In Revelation, the second coming of Christ is hardly a secret. It is Christ's public manifestation as the Lord of all things who comes to reign in healing and rule with justice. Indeed, he comes not to demolish the world over which he reigns, but to banish evil so that it may thrive with new life and joy as originally intended. Language that speaks of the end of the world is thoroughly unhelpful; we need to recover a language that speaks of the renewal of the world.⁴² That language is found in scripture, not least the closing chapters of Revelation.

The third task in working toward a renewal of eschatological thinking comes within the larger tasks of preaching and teaching in the local church. If the Church is to be marked by a biblical eschatology of hope, pastors must articulate it for the people. This means that pastors cannot shy

⁴¹ Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, *Are We Living in the End Times?* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1999).

⁴² For studies aimed at just such a recovery, see Craig C. Hill, *In God's Time: The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2002); Mathison, *Postmillennialism*; Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and Implications of a Christian Eschatology*, trans. J. W. Leitch (New York: Harper and Row, 1967); Douglas Wilson, *Heaven Misplaced: Christ's Kingdom on Earth* (Moscow, ID: Canon, 2008); N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperOne, 2008).

away from tough questions relating to the interpretation of Revelation. It also means that pastors will need to have some basic competency in the Jewish Apocalyptic literary form, in order to respond thoughtfully and faithfully to various pessimistic distortions of the eschaton.⁴³ When the Harold Camping's of the world begin to predict the day and the hour of their so-called doomsday, pastors bear the responsibility of helping the Church to think biblically about their claims. This is especially important because such grim predictions are generally promulgated on the claim that they are biblically faithful. Pastors must be able to answer the questions raised by these far-fetched forecasts and help the Church to understand how they are hermeneutically flawed misinterpretations. If we are to have a thoroughgoing biblical eschatology of hope, then the pastors who lead the church day in and day out must bear the mantle of ecclesial theologian, as challenging as it may be. Indeed, if those many unnamed local pastors in diverse places will not accept this responsibility, there is little chance that an eschatology of hope will ever prevail in the Church.

CONCLUSION

Having surveyed the literary context of sea language in Judaism and Revelation, it is clear that the author of the Apocalypse intends to convey the typical Jewish perspective that the sea was symbolic of evil, oppression, and all that is antagonistic to God's people. This means that the disappearance of the sea in John's vision of new creation in Revelation 21:1 represents the removal of evil and wickedness from the created order. In light of this symbolic meaning, it is clear that Revelation presents an eschatology of hope and that ecclesial fidelity to Christian scripture means maintaining that same eschatology of hope. Unfortunately, eschatological pessimism marks a significant portion of the contemporary Christian theological landscape. Characterized by doomsday predictions and end of the world countdowns, such eschatological pessimism brings unnecessary embarrassment to the Church of Jesus Christ. One of the many tasks we now face, therefore, is to recover a thoroughly biblical eschatology of hope and to make it known within the walls of the Church and without. In order for such a recovery to take place, at least three tasks lie before us. We must: (1) articulate the fundamental goodness of God's creation and God's commitment to its

⁴³ For an introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic with suggestions for further reading see Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2003), 475-478; Cf. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 280-298.

redemption, (2) recover the language of scripture, not least Revelation, that projects a future with a hope, and (3) have pastors able to preach and teach accurately the biblical eschatology of hope and correct unhelpful ideas that project an eschatology of dread. If we do not attend to this triple task, we will not begin to move toward an eschatology of hope let alone actually recover one.

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DYING WELL BEFORE FAMILY, FRIENDS, AND THE COMMUNITY

KENNETH B.E. ROXBURGH

On the same day that I was invited to contribute a pastoral reflection on "dying well" I had an accident necessitating a trip to an ER in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. A CT scan and a later MRI indicated that I had a Meningioma, a tumor originating in the Meninges which would need to be surgically removed. Although my neurosurgeon assured me that this was not "life threatening" and was not malignant, it made me approach this reflection no longer merely as a detached theological exploration but rather from the context of personal experience.

Since I was ordained to the ministry of word and sacrament in 1978, I have shared the journey of many people who are dying while ministering the grace of God as a pastor. However, when the ER doctor—with little "bedside manner"—blurted out that I had a brain tumor, my wife and I were left stumbling for a coherent response.

I am convinced that we need a robust theology that is willing to struggle with the ambiguity of accepting death as well as protesting that it is not the ultimate purpose of God for humankind. Within the tradition of British Evangelicalism in which I was nurtured, death was always inextricably linked to the entry of sin into the world. Death was viewed as an intrusion rather than part of creation itself. Yet prior to the story of the fall, Genesis tells us that humans are taken from dust and to dust they will return (Gen. 2:7; 3:19). If death is to be viewed initially as part of God's creation, then it is not to be feared. And still, because of our fallenness it has become an enemy. The presence of the "tree of life" indicates that death was only ever to be seen as a provisional aspect of creation although we experience it more often as a hostile force (Gen 2:9). From another perspective, death was often viewed in my own spiritual tradition as the release of the soul from the body and for "far better." In this latter view, death was not to be viewed negatively for the one who died. The words of Dylan Thomas would never have been spoken at a funeral service in my local Plymouth Brethren Assembly:

Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rage at close of day;

Rage, rage against the dying of the light.¹

An understanding of death as an enemy not to be finally overcome until the day of resurrection, allows us to protest, to weep, to mourn and yet not to do so in such a way that we feel that death will ever separate us from the love of God.

A robust theology of death will also appreciate the way in which God has identified with humanity and has taken the experience of suffering and death into his own being through incarnation and crucifixion. If we are to encounter the presence of God's mercy and comfort for us in the experience of death and dying, then we need to know that God fully appreciates what death is really like. Some would suggest that when Christ died, his knowledge of suffering and of death was only experienced through his human nature but not his divine nature. Yet natures do not suffer or die—they exist in persons. It is a person who suffers and persons who die. The divine nature of Christ existed prior to the incarnation in the second person of the Trinity. Following the events of the incarnation we can say that the human nature of Christ also existed in the person of God the Son. Thus, the experience of physical, emotional, and spiritual suffering—even death itself—was experienced by the second person of the Trinity. In this way we can genuinely speak of God entering into our experience of life and of death and dying. The incarnation and death of our Lord means that God enters into experiences that he has never known before—especially when he “tastes the death” of all humankind (Hebrews 2: 9). Donald MacLeod speaks of how Christ “experienced death unmitigated and unqualified: death with a sting, a death without light, comfort or encouragement. . . . a journey into a black hole . . . a spiritual desertion beyond our imagining.”² God has taken death into his being. Because of the darkest moment on the cross when Christ cried out “my God, my God why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34b) we can be assured that the one who prayed this prayer of deepest anguish and despair was God the Son.

If Christ has taken the sting out death then death need not be feared, although the process of dying may be something that causes us apprehension. John Stott, the Evangelical Anglican theologian, died this summer. When

¹ Dylan Thomas, “Do not go gentle into that good night,” in *Dylan Thomas: Selected Poems 1934-1952*, rev. ed. (New York: New Directions Books, 2003), 122.

² Donald MacLeod, *The Person of Christ*, *Contours of Christian Theology* 7 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 217

asked for an explanation of his wishes should he become incapacitated or unconscious, Stott spoke of how he did not want to cling to life if it was to be “artificially prolonged.” He concluded “I have a living hope of a yet more glorious life beyond death, and I do not wish to be unnecessarily hindered from inheriting it.”³ Dying well is filled with ambiguity, but for the Christian it need not be feared. We know God himself is with us, and his grace sustains us on our journey into and through death.

Yet, as Karl Barth reminds us “the goal of human life is not death but resurrection”⁴ and a place in the new creation which God’s presence is enjoyed through an encounter in the fellowship of the divine life. This will not be merely individualistic, but a corporate experience as the whole body of Christ, indeed the whole creation is renewed in self-giving relationships. In the final Harry Potter book, J.K. Rowling has Dumbledore tell the young hero, “Do not pity the dead, Harry, pity the living. Above all pity those who live without love.”⁵ If love is the essence of God’s being, and we are baptized into the life of the Trinity, then eternal life in the new creation is an ever-expanding encounter with, and an expression of love towards others. Alan Torrance suggests that “beatific vision” should be better understood as “beatific participation.”⁶ Likewise, commenting on the picture offered by Revelation, Paul Fiddes speaks of how this metaphor “unlike the temple, is an image of busy activity and creativity as well as fellowship. . . . There will be journeys to make, adventures to be had.”⁷

If dying well lives with an expectation and hope of the new creation, then it must also be inextricably linked with “living well” in the here and now. The words sometimes attributed to Martin Luther—“even if I knew that the world would end tomorrow, I would still plant an apple tree today”—sums up a Reformation spirituality that saw no distinction between the secular and the sacred. Reflecting on a serious illness had led me to be more conscious of the gift of each day and the opportunities that each day offers to

³ John Wyatt, “I Have a Living Hope of a Yet More Glorious Life Beyond Death,” in *John Stott: A Portrait by his Friends*, ed. by Christopher J. H. Wright, (Nottingham, UK: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 211.

⁴ Cited from cover of *Time Magazine*, April 20, 1962.

⁵ J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* (New York: Arthur A. Levine Books, 2007), 722.

⁶ Alan Torrance, *Persons in Communion: Trinitarian Description and Human Participation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clarke, 1996), 39n.

⁷ Paul S. Fiddes, *The Promised End: Eschatology in Theology and Literature*, Challenges in Contemporary Theology 7 (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 287.

spend time with family and friends and to live as well as I can, upheld by the grace of a triune God who eternally goes out of himself for the sake of others in unrestrained generosity.

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TURN, TURN, TURN, TURNING NO MORE: AN ESCHATOLOGICAL REFLECTION ON ECCLESIASTES 3:1-11

BRAD EAST

Even in our biblically illiterate society, most everybody knows the line: "To every thing there is a season, and a time for every purpose under heaven" (Eccles. 3:1, KJV). We've heard it at funerals and weddings; we know it best from the King James Version; we start humming along, "Turn, Turn, Turn," with The Byrds' musical adaptation. And not without reason. Hear, again, these powerful words of wisdom from Ecclesiastes 3:1-8, 11:¹

There is a time for everything,
and a season for every activity under the heavens:
a time to be born and a time to die,
a time to plant and a time to uproot,
a time to kill and a time to heal,
a time to tear down and a time to build,
a time to weep and a time to laugh,
a time to mourn and a time to dance,
a time to scatter stones and a time to gather them,
a time to embrace and a time to refrain,
a time to search and a time to give up,
a time to keep and a time to throw away,
a time to tear and a time to mend,
a time to be silent and a time to speak,
a time to love and a time to hate,
a time for war and a time for peace. . . .

He has made everything beautiful in its time.
He has also set eternity in the human heart;
yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end.

¹ All citations, unless otherwise noted, are taken from Today's New International Version. The reasons for my use of this translation rather than the standard one (NRSV) are twofold: (1) the particular language found in the passages of Ecclesiastes, Paul, and Hebrews cited below; (2) the more popular nature of this essay's concern and object of critique. For the latter reason, too, there are hereafter no footnotes, the presence of which would in my judgment cloud rather than clarify the argument.

In the following, I want to honor the fact that this passage contains within it deep power and meaning for persons whose years, experiences, and wisdom confirm something of its message. It is, not surprisingly, a favorite biblical passage to be read at funerals, a comforting word for the seasons of life utterly beyond our grasp. And it is not difficult to see why. It does what any poem about such life-encompassing matters should do, treating them with the intimate respect, depth, and ambiguity they deserve. It resonates with us because we find ourselves, our lives, our friends, our families, our joys, and our pains in these words. In short, we find life—*true* life as it is lived—in this poem. I want therefore to tread carefully in my treatment of it.

Let me begin, then, as my concerns with this text did—with a hesitancy. This hesitancy stems from the way Christians normally read the passage, and the theological worldview underpinning such a reading. Different Christians' interpretations of the text are, of course, varied, but they seem to share a similar constant: a kind of warm acceptance, or even justification or passivity, vis-à-vis the world the poem describes. That is to say, the world imaginatively figured in Ecclesiastes is a world constituted by death, violence, killing, mourning, separation, hatred, and war—along with their (seemingly) natural corollaries. And this world is simply taken for granted.

From the vantage point of the wisdom tradition—and especially the far ledge Qoheleth occupies in that field of thought in the Old Testament—this perspective makes perfect sense. Rather than beginning with God and looking down, wisdom begins with human experience and looks up. Wisdom, as it were, keeps the gaze level; looking *around*, the wise person spies heaven's work on earth's plane, commonly available in ordinary line of sight. The God here envisioned is ever-present in the lively audience of creation, in its ongoing sustenance and resourceful fecundity, and just so in the mundane outworking of human society. The Book of Proverbs exemplifies this mainstream sapiential outlook.

Qoheleth, the "Teacher" or "Head of the Assembly" in Ecclesiastes, takes an even sharper edge, rarely finding God or even meaning in life—only vaporous vanity, incessant toil, perpetual hardship, unconquerable death. There is more to his analysis, of course, but these themes are especially pervasive.

It is thus understandable why Qoheleth, belonging as he does to the larger wisdom tradition, would describe the world in such terms. He is merely articulating what everyone else already knows: life consists of war

and peace, planting and uprooting, loving and hating. He takes a further step, however, to say that there is a "time" or "season" for each of these things. There is in the created order a sort of harmonious symmetry of good and evil; what's more, it is *God* who "has made everything beautiful in its time" (Eccles. 3:11). For many readers today, Christian and otherwise, this message lends great comfort, evoking rich experiential resonances. We find meaning in the idea that life's great losses—the wars of our parents and peers, the droughts and recessions of esteemed forebears, the deaths of the young or the undeserving—are imbued with a severe but necessary beauty.

To the extent that such hopes and consolations emerge from a desire to find God absent from no area of life, or to see God's steadying hand in the midst of chaos, or to confess that *this* "thing" needn't negate faith in the good creator God because "*no-thing*" does—this scriptural passage matches its own beauty with an ability to speak truthfully to people about the experience of faith in lived life. And yet: when a reading of this passage leads to what I mentioned above—namely, warm acceptance, justification, and/or passivity vis-à-vis the type of world the poem describes—the potent, truthful poetry of the text unwittingly contributes to theological error, and at times to political injury. The reason is as follows.

Christians do not believe there is a time for everything. We believe that in Christ the time has changed. There was once a time for all things, but that time is over. Now, in the death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, present time is no longer fallen time. Rather, present time is *future* time, reconciled time. In the death of Jesus the triune God has put to death all of the deathly shadows cast by the good things God created for life in this world. In this way the cross is God's definitive act of *asymmetry*, abolishing death's parasitic negations of life precisely by submitting to the ultimate negation, death itself—only to absorb and triumph over it in abundance of life. (Paraphrasing John 10:10: Death comes only to steal and kill and destroy. Christ has come that we may have life, and have it to the full.) In the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, moreover, God's good future in which all those good things *will be* brought to redeemed fruition and restoration has invaded this world even *today*. The resurrected Jesus—whose last breath was death's own and whose new breath is the Spirit—is thus the place, the personal site, where the in-breaking reign of God has come in fact, in a kind of proleptic plenitude.

Accordingly, the community which gathers around Jesus, which follows and worships and believes on his name—that is, the church—

participates in the fulsome future brought forward in time by and in his resurrection. It does so through the power of the Holy Spirit, who ("himself") is the sign and deposit and source of that coming future's consummation. The triune God who rescues the world in Jesus and promises a new future for that world has, then, given the world a people who offer in their life a sharing in the coming restoration of all things.

In sum, the time has changed irrevocably—for the world, because its future in God has irrupted into the present, and so for the church, as ambassadors of the eschaton. As Hebrews 2:8-9 says, "Yet at present we do not see everything subject to him. But we do see Jesus . . ." The people of God thus names those who have been given the eyes to see that, though the nations rage and kings set themselves against the Lord's anointed (Psalm 2:1-2), the crucified and risen Jesus is in fact Lord of all the earth. It is therefore the way of this Jesus—how he treated neighbors, handled money, cared for the needy, responded to violence, taught his followers—which the church is now called and empowered to embody in its life together. Jesus did not come merely to fulfill an arbitrary divine *diktat*, so that nothing changed except individuals' "standing" before God. With and in Jesus the entire cosmos was *altered*; and the church is least faithful when its only witness or speech to the world involves a decidedly *unchanged* capitulation to "the way things are," otherwise called "the real world" or "reality." The real world is none other than the new world in Christ, reality none other than that effected by cross and resurrection—for "[n]either . . . means anything; what counts is the new creation" (Gal. 6:15).

Hence, to hear in Ecclesiastes 3 something other than precisely what Jesus came to *change* is a drastic mishearing for the mission of the church. God has not made death beautiful in its time: God stands against death. Death is the enemy. Oppression and violence are the enemy. In Jesus, God stood against these things once and for all and put *them* to death. Their reign is through. The principalities and the powers of death have been defeated: "And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross" (Col. 3:15). In Christ, God has no more time for such things. The word of the gospel of God has only this, finally, to say to death and death's rule: *time's up*.

I am, of course, describing only one side of the (eschatological) coin: in Christ death is dead, but we still await the final redemption when all will be made new. The Lord tarries, we keep patience for the *parousia*, but in the meantime death and violence and brokenness remain. So why "oppose" the

common reading of this passage? Why not continue to affirm with it that God makes everything beautiful in its time?

For this reason: when the church forgets its enemy, it grows comfortable in a world that it ought to know, better than anyone else, is passing away. More broadly, the church skirts sketchy theological ground when it privileges the sapiential to the eschatological, the providential to the apocalyptic. Christ “shared in [our] humanity so that by his death he might . . . free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death” (Heb. 2:14-15). When we begin to view death no longer as the defeated enemy but as just one more natural, God-ordained stage of life, we—the church!—lose our meaning for existence, our very vocational charter. And Qoheleth, at least in popular interpretation, has the potential thereby to render our witness politically passive: perhaps there *must be* a time for foreclosures, for nuclear arsenals, for enhanced interrogations—also for second homes, for standing militaries, for protecting our borders . . .

To such claims the gospel speaks a different word: The Holy One of Israel, in coming near to dwell among us, assumed a life without home or means or security for the sake of a world rid of such death-dealing dichotomies. In so doing God did not act as if structures and forces of evil did not exist, or as if, being “the way things are,” they were quite all right left enough alone. Rather, in Christ, God engaged them fully, took them upon Godself, and shared the life of those who suffer by their hand. So must we if we hope and claim to follow this one as Lord.

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THE MYTH OF HEAVEN: DEMYTHOLOGIZING AND REMYTHOLOGIZING

DAVID W. CONGDON

- (1) Christopher Morse, *The Difference Heaven Makes: Rehearsing the Gospel as News*. New York: T & T Clark, 2010. x + 148 pp. \$18.77
- (2) John A. T. Robinson, *In the End, God: A Study of the Christian Doctrine and the Last Things—Special Edition*. Edited by Robin Parry. Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2011. 163 pp. \$23.00

Theology today finds itself compelled to take a fresh look at the problem of heaven. The past decade has seen two striking developments: (1) the development of a more rigorous Pauline apocalyptic theology and (2) the rise of an evangelical universalism. This essay attempts to bring the two into conversation. Central to both is what we might call the problem of heaven. Put differently: what is the hope proper to Christian faith? I will assess this question in conversation with Christopher Morse's highly acclaimed work, *The Difference Heaven Makes*, and the special edition republication of John A. T. Robinson's classic work, *In the End, God*. The latter is edited by Robin Parry—who also writes under the pseudonym, Gregory MacDonald—the central figure in the current project of evangelical universalism (hereafter EU). I will advance the following thesis: both works engage in what we might call the “demythologizing” of heaven, but this needs to be augmented by a kind of “remythologizing” of our heaven-talk.

Heaven has to be demythologized in the dual sense of being (a) *deliteralized* as a present existential encounter with and obedience to Christ (in contrast to a post-mortem destination), and (b) *apocalyptically actualized* as the movement of God's saving action. In carrying out this necessary task of demythologizing heaven, Morse and the apocalyptic theologians need to more directly address themselves to the universalistic implications of their insights, while Robinson—and especially the evangelical universalists who are reading him—need to address the apocalyptic interpretation of scripture. Each in isolation leaves us with only a truncated account of Christian hope in heaven. In the case of the evangelical universalists, the account remains too mythological; that is to say, their account of heaven is not apocalyptic (or demythologized) enough. At the same time, however, there is a need to remythologize heaven, but not by bringing back the ancient myths of a three-

tiered universe. Christian theology needs to appropriate the recent insights of work in the sociology of myth, specifically that of Bruce Lincoln. I will conclude by arguing that Christian talk of heaven has to be simultaneously demythologized (in its ancient metaphysical form) and remythologized (in a modern sociopolitical form). Heaven is a myth that mobilizes the community of God's people as an embodied agent of hope in a disenchanted world.

DEMYTHOLOGIZING HEAVEN I: HEAVEN AS THE COURSE OF GOD'S APOCALYPTIC

Christopher Morse advances the provocative claim that the gospel news of heaven needs to be heard anew. The "literal" or "univocal" understanding of heaven as an actual place where the departed go is a mishearing of the gospel. The univocal approach understands the biblical talk of heaven to be the same as talk about any other occurrence. Heaven in this hearing refers to an actual location, whether an invisible, spiritual home or a coming physical kingdom. A univocal approach is tone-deaf to the multivocality of scripture, and thus it misses the way scripture's apocalyptic witness to the "heavenly forthcoming" of God that is "at hand" but not "in hand" cannot be rightly heard in the same way as reports about other events and realities. "Taking the news of heaven literally," he says, "shows itself . . . not to be trustworthy or in keeping with the Gospel message."¹

In order to redress this problem, he looks at three other hearings of this message. Each of these is closer to the truth than the last. The first is the existentialist hearing of heaven as myth as represented by the work of Rudolf Bultmann and Paul Tillich. Morse deserves thanks for giving Bultmann and Tillich a more charitable interpretation than is often the case in contemporary theology. He understands demythologizing as a "deliteralizing" of our speaking about God and heaven,² and thus it renders a necessary service to theology. But he criticizes Bultmann for dispensing with the mythical language altogether, while Tillich succeeds in giving the mythical language a positive symbolic function in his theology. Morse criticizes both for imposing an "alien framework" upon the hearing of heaven, and thus for missing the narrative and promissory aspects that he privileges.³ The third and fourth hearings present the approaches of Karl Barth and Jürgen

¹ Christopher Morse, *The Difference Heaven Makes: Rehearing the Gospel as News* (New York: T & T Clark, 2010), 37.

² Ibid., 38.

³ Ibid., 40.

Moltmann in their presentations of heaven as “saga” and “promise.” Barth’s saga is a way of affirming the newsworthy character of heaven as an “actual event” in history, but not a “factual event” that can be measured.⁴ Morse interprets Barth as a proto-postliberal in the order of Hans Frei; he reads Barth’s distinction between *Historie* and *Geschichte* in terms of Frei’s concept of “realistic narrative.”⁵ But it is Moltmann’s promissory account that receives the most approval for its redefinition of the gospel from news about a past occurrence to news about a present and future advent replete with an eschatological and theopolitical exigency.

Morse seeks to take seriously Bultmann’s decisive question to Barth in a letter from 1952, where Bultmann challenges Barth to come clean about his understanding of reality: “The decisive thing is to make clear with what concept of reality, of being and events, we really operate in theology, and how this relates to the concepts in which not only other people think and speak of reality, being, and events, but in which we theologians also think and speak in our everyday lives.”⁶ This is a restatement of the same basic challenge posed in his 1950 essay on “The Problem of Hermeneutics”:

The demand to make of Barth is that he give an account of his own conceptuality. He grants my claim, for example, that the resurrection of Jesus is not a historical fact that could be established as such by means of the science of history. But it does not follow from this, he thinks, that the resurrection did not occur I ask, What does Barth understand here by ‘story’ and ‘happened’? What kind of an event is it of which one can say that ‘it far more certainly really happened in time than all the things that the historians as such can establish’? It is perfectly clear that Barth interprets the statements of scripture by means of a conceptuality that he brings with him. But what is the source and meaning of this conceptuality?⁷

⁴ Ibid., 41-42.

⁵ For an interpretation of Barth that contrasts more sharply with that of Frei, see Bruce McCormack’s essay, “Beyond Nonfoundational and Postmodern Readings of Barth,” in Bruce L. McCormack, *Orthodox and Modern: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 109-65.

⁶ Karl Barth and Rudolf Bultmann, *Barth-Bultmann Letters, 1922-1966*, ed. Bernd Jaspert, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1981), 87.

⁷ Rudolf Bultmann, *New Testament and Mythology and Other Basic Writings*, trans. Schubert M. Ogden (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 69-93 (89). Cf. Rudolf Bultmann, *Glauben*

Unfortunately, Barth never responded to this question directly, though the bulk of *Church Dogmatics* IV is an implicit attempt. To his credit, Morse decides to answer Bultmann's challenge, and he does so with the tools of Pauline apocalypticism, specifically the work of his colleague at Union Seminary in New York, J. Louis Martyn. Apocalyptic here refers to "an incalculable cosmic inbreaking" in which "what is imminent is not immanent."⁸ He then develops this with the help of Barth's often-overlooked concepts of "divinatory imagination" and "faithful disbelief." In agreement with Bultmann, heaven is a reality that cannot be heard literally, but neither, so Morse claims, can it be heard simply as dispensable myth. Instead, it is a reality that "involves poetic sensibility" and "parabolic renderings."⁹ The gospel talk of heaven refers to the apocalyptic *action* and *advent* of God, what he earlier calls the "course of God's forthcoming."¹⁰ It speaks of "nothing less than God taking a new course of action in coming events to make the kind of home with us that will ever prove to be the right home for us."¹¹ Lest we think of this in terms of the literal notion of a "heavenly home" all too often sentimentalized within Christian spirituality, Morse is very careful to also speak of this divine course of action as "a *basileia* at hand."¹² Our home is a new theopolitical community engaged in the work of discerning the direction of God's invasive movement.

The linguistic play between "at hand" and "in hand" is central to the entire argument of the book. The fact that heaven is "at hand" means, for Morse, that it is a happening which is present and real but not under our control; it is an unanticipatable event that is "not of [or from] this world."¹³ The language of "at-handedness" is an apocalyptic version of Barth's dialectical notion of "wholly otherness." The basic point is the same: the reign of God in Christ is not an observable fact in the world—not then, or now, or in the future—but an incalculable divine action that inaugurates a new age in the midst of the old for those with the eyes and ears of faith. Heaven is a "reality" for faith alone, and only those who have what Martyn

und Verstehen: Gesammelte Aufsätze, 4 vols. (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1933-65), 2:211-35 (234); hereafter *GuV*.

⁸ Morse, *The Difference Heaven Makes*, 54.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 61.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 13-14.

¹² *Ibid.*, 21.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 22.

calls the “bifocal vision” of faith are able to encounter it and live according to its provocations. God’s action in the advent of Christ is apocalyptic in the sense that “it is not visible, demonstrable, or provable in the categories and with the means of perception native to ‘everyday’ existence. . . . The inbreak of the new creation is itself revelation, apocalypse.” The invasion of divine grace causes an “epistemological crisis” for those whom it encounters, since the world they inhabit now appears in an entirely new light. The one confronted by the apocalypse sees “both the evil age and the new creation *simultaneously*.”¹⁴

Morse’s book—which touches on much more than this brief account can possibly do justice to—is a brief but brilliant exercise in what we might call apocalyptic dogmatics. It renders a much-needed service to the church. Even so, it seems to me that the two areas of demythologizing and universal salvation deserve further attention; the book discusses the former repeatedly, but it is largely silent about the latter. First, we must ask, is Morse’s reading of Bultmann a fair one? The situation is complex, and a complete response would go far beyond the bounds of this essay. Several different aspects have to be disentangled, including: (a) the aspect of deliteralizing that Morse affirms as necessary, (b) the claim that Bultmann imposes an “alien framework” and “existential ontology” upon scripture,¹⁵ and (c) the claim that demythologizing interprets heaven “too exclusively in terms of the self in disregard of a wider social and political world.”¹⁶ A full defense of Bultmann would argue that (a) is only a small and potentially misleading aspect of demythologizing, (b) is a common but mistaken criticism, and (c) is a valid complaint but not a strike against the hermeneutic itself, which remains valid in its opposition to the construction of casuistic political worldviews. In lieu of providing such a defense, I will restrict my comments to the problem of myth and the theological meaning of demythologizing. What I hope to show is that the constructive theological position put forward by Morse is an exercise in demythologizing, as Bultmann understands it. To demythologize heaven is to speak of it in a Pauline-apocalyptic mode.

Morse misconstrues Bultmann’s use of myth-talk when he says that it “obviously include[s] all news of the acts of God or of any agency reported

¹⁴ J. Louis Martyn, *Galatians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 104.

¹⁵ Morse, *The Difference Heaven Makes*, 40. The word “existential” ought to be “existentialist.”

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 39.

to derive from heaven.”¹⁷ Accordingly, to demythologize heaven, on Morse’s reading, means to cut off all speech about an apocalyptic divine action, leaving one with the kernel of existentialism. For a more accurate picture of what Bultmann means, we can turn to his 1961 essay “On the Problem of Demythologizing.”¹⁸ He begins by saying that myth speaks about a “reality” (*Wirklichkeit*), but it does so “in an inadequate way.”¹⁹ What becomes clear is that mythological thinking involves talking about God as something “in hand” as opposed to a reality that is only ever “at hand.” According to Bultmann, “mythological thinking . . . naively objectifies what is thus beyond the world as though it were something within the world [*das Jenseits zum Diesseits*].” Such thinking “talk[s] about the action of transcendent powers as something that can be observed and established in the world.”²⁰ In other words, mythology speaks about God as something “in hand,” i.e., as an object that is like any other factual, observable object in the world. Mythology fails to respect the qualitative otherness of God; it tries to speak about God directly, when we can only talk about God’s act in an “analogical”²¹ way in faithful response to the prior initiative of God’s word of address in Jesus Christ.

To demythologize our speech about God means to speak of God as an event that is, at Morse likes to say, only ever “at hand.” It means to let the saving event of Christ determine our theological epistemology. Demythologizing is, to use the phrase of Martyn, an “epistemology at the turn of the ages,”²² with the qualification that this turn takes place in the kerygmatic proclamation of God’s word. The consequence of this epistemological turn is that God is seen as one who is always going ahead of us, who is never within our grasp but is “on the move,” as C. S. Lewis famously describes Aslan. Bultmann stresses this point in the conclusion to his 1955 essay, “Science and Existence”:

God does not stand still and does not put up with being made an object of observation. One cannot *see* God; one can only *hear*

¹⁷ Ibid., 37.

¹⁸ Bultmann, *New Testament and Mythology*, 155-63. Cf. *GuV*, 4:128-37. Published first in Italy in 1961 and in the German series, *Kerygma und Mythos*, in 1963.

¹⁹ Ibid., 155.

²⁰ Ibid., 161, 160.

²¹ Ibid., 162.

²² J. Louis Martyn, “Epistemology at the Turn of the Ages,” in *Theological Issues in the Letters of Paul* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1997), 89-110.

God. God's invisibility is not due to the inadequacy of our organs of perception but is God's being removed in principle from the domain of objectifying thinking. God's revelation is revelation only *in actu* and is never a matter of God's having already been revealed. . . . For God is not to be held fast in faith in the sense that believers can look back on their faith as a decision made once and for all. God always remains beyond what has once been grasped God is 'the guest who always moves on' (Rilke), who cannot be apprehended in any now as one who remains. . . . God ever stands before me as one who is coming, and this constant futurity of God is God's transcendence.²³

It should be clear from such statements that Bultmann has no intention of discarding talk of God's decisive and salvific action in the world. Nor is there any truth to the claim that Bultmann makes language about God merely a symbol for some interior, private, existential experience. He addresses this misunderstanding explicitly in *Jesus Christ and Mythology*. He speaks in the voice of his critics, asking, "does it not follow [from demythologizing] that God's action is deprived of objective reality, that it is reduced to a purely subjective, psychological experience (*Erlebnis*); that God exists only as an inner event in the soul, whereas faith has real meaning only if God exists outside the believer?" In response, Bultmann identifies himself with "Karl Barth and the so-called dialectical theologians" who made "an all-out attack" on this liberal notion of faith as experience.²⁴ His own position is "a totally different one," since on his account "the fact that God cannot be seen or apprehended apart from faith does not mean that He does not exist apart from faith."²⁵ The fact that God is only encountered in the event of revelation leads Bultmann to the notion of "paradoxical identity," which understands divine action to occur *within* worldly occurrences for those who have the eyes of faith. Martyn speaks of precisely the same thing when he describes faith as "see[ing] bifocally," in which there is a *simultaneity* of old age and new age for the believer.²⁶ Morse captures the same paradoxical simultaneity when he borrows Paul Lehmann's concept of

²³ Bultmann, *New Testament and Mythology*, 131-44 (144). Cf. *GuV*, 3:107-121 (121).

²⁴ Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (New York: Scribner, 1958), 70.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 72.

²⁶ Martyn, *Galatians*, 104.

“incommensurable juxtapositions.”²⁷ Bultmann’s dialectical-hermeneutical theology, like Pauline apocalyptic theology, affirms a *real* and *invasive* action on the part of God, but an action that is only “at hand” for faith—and so invisibly and paradoxically present within (or juxtaposed to) the visible old age—and never “in hand” as a generally observable occurrence outside of revelation.

The payoff of this rehearing of Bultmann is a surprising convergence between apocalyptic theology and the program of demythologizing, despite claims by Morse, Martyn, and others to the contrary.²⁸ This convergence requires us to recognize the way even the best interpretations—and here I agree that a generally apocalyptic reading is the most appropriate—are based on contemporary theological presuppositions. No reading can claim to be the “original” meaning of the text, nor should any reading aspire to achieve such a result. Liberal historicism and evangelical originalism are not only hermeneutically naïve, but also theologically hazardous. Rejecting these, there is no reason to fear a demythologizing hermeneutic. Any hermeneutical approach that seeks to speak of God in the present context as one who is known and encountered by grace through faith alone—and this certainly includes Pauline apocalyptic theology—necessarily demythologizes scripture.

A further benefit of this convergence is that it opens up new possibilities for understanding both Bultmann and Pauline apocalypticism. I would argue that Bultmann is an apocalyptic thinker (of a certain Pauline variety), while Pauline apocalypticism is an existentializing (i.e., demythologizing) interpretation of the gospel. This means that we should expect to find resources in Bultmann for understanding the genuine theological significance of heaven-talk, and in fact there is already ground-

²⁷ Morse, *The Difference Heaven Makes*, 108-11.

²⁸ Obviously, there are many more aspects to apocalyptic theology than simply the “in hand”/“at hand” distinction. That in itself would not properly qualify as apocalyptic. Unfortunately, I am unable in this paper to explore the problems associated with the language of God’s “cosmic” action, or to show how Bultmann addressed this issue in his 1964 response to Ernst Käsemann. And the whole topic of the sociopolitical dimension of heaven that is clearly central to Morse’s account will have to await a future engagement. Yet on each of these points I would argue that there is no impasse or contradiction between Bultmann and contemporary apocalyptic theology, only a change in terminology and location of emphasis. If there is an impasse, then it is based on additional demands or presuppositions that are not proper to Pauline apocalyptic as such.

breaking research on that very topic.²⁹ But it likewise means that we should expect to see demythologizing at work in apocalyptic theology, and Morse's *Difference* is a testament to this fact. His rejection of the univocal approach is, as he admits, a demythologizing (or deliteralizing) move, and the distinction between "at hand" and "in hand" is a restatement of Bultmann's own theological concern. But it goes beyond this point. The closing chapter on the "hope of heaven" is a thorough demythologizing of Christian expectations. That which is "coming to pass" is not some future spiritual home but a divine forthcoming here and now:

Being faced by what is coming to pass, there is no fear of death, for the arrival on the scene is of a 'perfect love that casts out all fear' (1 Jn 4.18). The promise to come is never witnessed as a deferral of grace. The 'last day' is the day 'at hand.' The *there*, once again, is proclaimed to be *here* on the scene of greatest loss without ceasing to be *there* at the last when the last enemy is destroyed. . . . What then is the hope of heaven, if any, expressed in these parameters? At the least this much we can acknowledge, to sum up from the foregoing observations: The 'real world' is proclaimed to be one in which there is life currently arriving on the scene, in whatever situation we are facing, that is stronger than any undeniable loss threatening us, including death.³⁰

Some of these words could have been stated by Bultmann himself. The notion that the "last day" occurs in every today, *hic et nunc*, is one of the key arguments that he advances, in light of the Fourth Gospel, as part of his program of demythologizing. The idea that God's promise is fulfilled in its *proclamation* in the present *now*, and is not to be deferred to the chronological future, is characteristically Bultmannian. More similar still is the highly existential tension between love and fear that Morse describes as the content of this hope. The gospel frees us from fear and, as Bultmann would say, opens us for the coming future of God. On all these points, I am in full agreement with Morse's conclusions, but it is important not to cover up or ignore the way these represent a *fulfillment* of Bultmann's hermeneutical insights and not their rejection. Some will no doubt take this

²⁹ See Michael Dorhs, *Über den Tod hinaus: Grundzüge einer Individualeschatologie in der Theologie Rudolf Bultmanns* (Frankfurt am Main: P. Lang, 1999).

³⁰ Morse, *The Difference Heaven Makes*, 117.

as a pretext for criticizing Morse's very fine work ("Oh, so it's Bultmannian; we can ignore it then"), but this is quite the opposite of my intention, which is to recover Bultmann's genuine contributions to Christian theology.³¹

Turning now briefly to the second area of interest, what about the question of universalism? Directly following the quote above, Morse writes: "I say 'we' in a nonrestrictive sense, for this coming of life we hear of at the tomb of Lazarus is as unbounded in its embrace as the love it embodies, a love without exception, inbreaking at hand in the situation of each and all. This life is not conditional upon the state of affairs prior to its coming, nor is it subject to prior approximations."³² This is about as close as he comes to affirming a universal salvation. There are any number of possible reasons for not making the position more explicit. I will try to spell out what I think are the most likely and relevant. First, of course, is the unwillingness to state dogmatically a position about soteriology and eschatology as it pertains to human beings. The approach throughout Morse's book is to lay all the stress on what *God* is doing and has done, while leaving open the question of who (and how many) will participate in this heavenly reality. Second, in implicit agreement with Bultmann, there is a noticeable emphasis on the radical particularity and promise of God's heavenly forthcoming: "the precise name of the one whom he is said to love is spoken, 'Lazarus, come forth!'"³³ This does not preclude a universalistic soteriology,³⁴ but it certainly qualifies it—and may lead one to resist such statements.

³¹ Looking back over the whole of the book, the basic disagreement that Morse has with Bultmann concerns the latter's apparently apolitical conception of the gospel. It would not be inaccurate to say that Morse's understanding of apocalyptic interpretation differs from demythologizing only in its explicitly theopolitical articulation of Christian faith. The question, then, is whether demythologizing is *necessarily* opposed to a sociopolitical rendering of the gospel kerygma. I would strongly argue that such is not the case. Bultmann is only concerned about attempts to turn the gospel into a political program or worldview, such that God is used to legitimate a particular social ideology. If Bultmann fails to develop the politically charged character of the gospel, this is only because of his concern to preclude this abuse of Christian theology. Barth does the exact same thing with respect to pneumatology, human agency, religious experience, and other perceived "liberal" concerns. Barth scholars have repeatedly shown how Barth's theology does not reject these but simply reorders or redefines them. Should we do any less for Bultmann? Opposing him because he is overly careful about avoiding a political manipulation of the kerygma is unjustifiable.

³² Morse, *The Difference Heaven Makes*, 117-18.

³³ *Ibid.*, 118.

³⁴ Tom Greggs has argued for this at length, even demonstrating the way a Christian universalism must have its starting-point in particularity. See Tom Greggs, *Barth, Origen, and Universal Salvation: Restoring Particularity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

Third, if heaven is not a literal place for souls to commune beyond death, it makes sense for Morse (and here I am in agreement with him) to emphasize the ethics of heaven (chap. 4) and to existentialize the eschatological hope of heaven (chap. 5). Morse has very little to say about the apocalyptic meaning of salvation, but it would seem to follow that “to be saved” means to hear and respond to the gospel news that God is “at hand.” What this means is that, while the love of God is certainly unbounded, it is nevertheless evidently the case that not everyone actively participates in it. Morse alludes at times, as in the block quote above, to the Pauline statement that the “last enemy” will “at the last” be destroyed, but it is never really clear what this might mean.³⁵ If the “last day” is the day “at hand,” then is not the “last enemy” precisely the hellish fear of death that God’s word destroys with the news of God’s forthcoming? But if there is still an outstanding redemption of the cosmos, would this then entail an observable change in the world itself? Can one reject a univocal fundamentalism and still retain the notion of a future “new heavens and new earth” that is in some sense an extension of our present bodily existence? One wishes that Morse had stated his views on these matters directly, since these are no doubt some of the pressing questions his readers will want to have answered.

Such silence is not unexpected; it is, in fact, the norm. Modern theology is caught in a difficult place. On the one hand, it rightly refuses to make theology competitive with science. While this is easy with respect to Genesis and the origins of life, it is far more controversial and unsettling when applied to eschatology and the end of history. On the other hand, it also rightly affirms a genuine hope grounded in a love that is wholly unbounded. But this runs up against the manifest suffering in the world that is equally unbounded. In the scales of history, suffering and death are ostensibly the victors over any claims to hope and new life. It would thus seem necessary to posit either a quasi-gnostic existence in the spirit beyond death, or a literal coming of God’s kingdom upon the earth in some indeterminate future. The former is theologically problematic, while the latter requires the belief in supernatural wonders that has myriad theological problems of its own, in addition to conflicting with scientific forecasts. It’s no wonder that most theologians opt for ambiguity and silence, preferring to speak about *who* God is rather than *what* will happen at the end of time, since no one can say. Unfortunately, all of this means that even the best rehearing of heaven leaves

³⁵ Perhaps this lack of clarity is perfectly appropriate, since the biblical witness itself is unclear and ambiguous, even contradictory, on this very point.

us with many unanswered questions.

DEMYTHOLOGIZING MYTH 2: HEAVEN AS THE MOMENT OF PERSONAL DECISION

The foregoing assessment of Morse's *Difference* provides a framework for looking at the rise of EU. My primary purpose in bringing this recent development into conversation with Morse's work is that much of this new universalism labors under what I take to be an overly mythological conception of heaven. More on that later. First, I want to look at the special edition publication of Robinson's first book, *In the End, God*,³⁶ excellently edited by Parry, the author of *The Evangelical Universalist*.³⁷ As in *The Difference Heaven Makes*, a central theme running throughout this book is the question of myth and the task of demythologizing heaven. It becomes clear that Robinson's more explicitly Bultmannian approach helps to answer some of the questions that Morse leaves unaddressed, though Morse's social and ethical concerns are much-needed supplements.

The first edition of Robinson's *In the End* was published in 1950 (the second impression of 1958 is the one used by Parry). A second edition appeared in 1968, following the explosive 1963 publication of *Honest to God*, with numerous small changes and new prefaces to account for the differences in his theology and the wider theological landscape. The first thing to note is that Robinson's book was written before Moltmann's *Theology of Hope* appeared in 1964 (ET 1967). It also predates the rise of Pauline apocalypticism, which really began with the work of Ernst Käsemann in the late 1950s and early 1960s. One has to keep this historical context in mind when reading the opening introduction, where Robinson explains the eschatological lacuna in modern theology.³⁸ Today it's hard to imagine such a situation. We are inundated by works on eschatology, both popular (from *Left Behind* to *Love Wins*) and academic. Despite this dated

³⁶ John A. T. Robinson, *In the End, God: A Study of the Christian Doctrine and the Last Things—Special Edition*, ed. Robin Parry (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011). The special edition includes a superb introductory essay by Trevor Hart, a shorter version of which appears in the edited volume, *All Shall Be Well*.

³⁷ Gregory MacDonald, *The Evangelical Universalist* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2006). Cf. Robin A. Parry and Christopher H. Partridge, eds., *Universal Salvation?: The Current Debate* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2003).

³⁸ The lacuna, he notes, is particular to English-language theology. Most of his citations are from Paul Althaus's *Die letzten Dinge* and Oscar Cullmann's *Christ et le Temps*. Cullmann's book was translated in 1951; Althaus's work on eschatology has never been translated.

context, much of the work remains surprisingly relevant and worthwhile.

In the End was written as a response to a debate with T. F. Torrance in the pages of *Scottish Journal of Theology* regarding universalism.³⁹ Robinson's goal in the book is to address Torrance's criticisms and provide a more robust account of his position. Part of this involves a discussion of theological method. In the second chapter, Robinson describes a rather unique version of theological science, influenced by the Christian apologetics of Canon Alan Richardson. The essence of his position is that theology is the conceptual articulation of the present "data" of revelation. Theology is not metaphysical speculation, but rather restricts itself, in the case of eschatology, to the task of "formulat[ing] what doctrines of the end are involved in the understanding of God and the world necessary to explain and account for the existence of the Christian church. These doctrines will be reached by the strict application of scientifically controlled induction from the historical data, and will be as valid as similar conclusions of economics or physics within its own sphere."⁴⁰ The details of Robinson's method are not important. What *is* important is the fact that Robinson defines revelation as the present-tense "encounter with the living God, who discloses himself for what he is in the act of answering man's need and demanding his obedience in the here and now of his personal and social existence. . . . All revelation is of a now and for a now. It is not in itself information about the past or the future."⁴¹ Revelation is God speaking to us today (*deus dicit*), and theology is the conceptual explication of what *must* be true given this present starting-

³⁹ The essays from this debate are included as appendices in the new special edition.

⁴⁰ Robinson, *In the End, God*, 21. What makes this section on method so confusing for people today is that it reads like a mash-up of liberal theology, dialectical theology, and postliberalism. From liberal theology Robinson gets the notion that theology starts with "the basis 'stuff' of experience" (ibid., 20), and the whole conception of theology as a science (*Wissenschaft*) on par with the natural sciences is a tenet of Protestant liberalism going back to Schleiermacher. From dialectical theology, however, we get the emphasis (one that is stronger in the later chapters of the book) on theology as a science grounded on God's *revelation* in Jesus Christ: "The datum from which a scientific theology begins is . . . a community of faith grounded in a certain revelation of God" (ibid., 21). Finally, the anticipatory specter of Lindbeckian postliberalism hangs over this chapter in its understanding of theology as a descriptive task that takes as a given "a certain complex of beliefs and practices embodied in the historic community of the Christian church" (ibid.). If I had to characterize Robinson's method, I would say that it belongs in the liberal camp of those who ground faith and theology in the *fides qua creditur* ("the faith by which it is believed"). Thankfully, Robinson is better in the rest of the book than his opening chapter on method would lead one to expect.

⁴¹ Ibid., 22.

point.⁴²

It is in this methodological context that Robinson puts forward the claim that myth is the *form* of all eschatology. Despite the generally Bultmannian flavor of Robinson's book, it would be a mistake at this point to assume that myth functions for him the way it does for Bultmann. Whereas Bultmann uses "myth" to refer to a naïve objectification of God as something "in hand," Robinson uses the word in a strikingly different way:

Myth of some kind is employed in many sciences when description is required where direct evidence is unobtainable. Physics, for instance, produces a "myth" or model to explain the basic constitution of matter, for the purposes of translating into some concrete imaginable picture what can accurately be stated only in formulae. The "truth" of the formulae does not depend on the later verification by sense-experience, if that were possible, of the mythical picture. . . . Theology too employs myth in the same way. It uses it for the purpose of translating its fundamental understanding of God, given and verified in present experience, into terms of the primal and ultimate, where it *must* apply and yet where direct evidence is, in the nature of the case, unobtainable. . . . Their truth does not depend on the mythical representations themselves being scientifically or historically accurate. Neither the myths of Genesis nor of Revelation set out to be *historical* reconstructions, i.e., literal accounts of what did, or what will, happen. As history they may be entirely imaginary, and yet remain theologically true. The only test of a myth is whether it adequately represents the scientific facts to be translated.⁴³

Robinson uses the word "myth" to mean what scientists calls a model, theory, or hypothesis—an extrapolation (or "translation") from the evidence to account for realities that are beyond empirical experience. It has nothing to do with the research of the *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule*, nor can it be conflated with Bultmann's program, even though they share a

⁴² Eschatology, he says, "is the formulation of statements about the final sovereignty of God as it must be understood if the data of Christian existence are to be scientifically explained. It is the explication of what must be true of the end, both of history and of the individual, if God is to be the God of the biblical faith" (ibid., 23).

⁴³ Robinson, *In the End, God*, 27.

similar emphasis on the existential present-tense as the locus of myth's meaningfulness.⁴⁴ Myth is a necessary aspect of our speech about God, since it is only through myth—that is, through theological theories—that we can speak about what the past or the future of God's relation with humanity. In this respect, Robinson and Morse are in agreement: one cannot dispense with myth without undercutting the ability of faith to speak truthfully about God.⁴⁵

Robinson employs this understanding of myth to account for both protology and eschatology. Regarding protology, he takes for granted the deliteralization of the Genesis myths as being the clear intention of these texts. The "real interest" of the author of Genesis 3 "is not in people who lived thousands of years ago, but in the humanity of his and every age."⁴⁶ These "myths of the first things" are written to represent the present and universal situation of humanity in terms of the primal past. The same holds true for the "myths of the last things."

The point of reference from which they start is the present. All the elements in the myth are first and foremost descriptions of *present* realities within the life of the new age. The second coming has happened in the return of Christ in the Spirit; the resurrection of the body has occurred in the putting on of the new man in the body of Christ; the millennium has been inaugurated in the reign of Christ in his church on earth; the Antichrist is a present reality wherever final refusal meets the gospel preaching; the

⁴⁴ Bultmann would not accept the liberal-scientific presupposition of empirical experience as the starting-point of Christian theological reflection.

⁴⁵ It is often forgotten, but Bultmann would agree, at least in part, with this claim regarding the necessity of mythical language. In *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, he clarifies this matter: "It is often asserted that the language of the Christian faith must of necessity be mythological language. This assertion must be examined carefully. First, even if we concede that the language of faith is really the language of myth, we must ask how this fact affects the program of de-mythologizing. This concession is by no means a valid argument against de-mythologizing, for the language of myth, when it serves as the language of faith, loses its mythological sense. To speak, for example, of God as creator, no longer involves speaking of His creatorship in the sense of the old myth. Mythological conceptions can be used as symbols or images which are perhaps necessary to the language of religion and therefore also of the Christian faith. Thus it becomes evident that the use of mythological language, far from being an objection to de-mythologizing, positively demands it" (Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, 67). It should be clear from this statement that Bultmann's concern is not with mythical language *per se*, but rather with "mythological thinking," i.e., the "mythological sense" of myth. Here I would argue that this sense is precisely the metaphysical-objectifying conception of God as a reality "in hand." Myth as faithful translation of the present encounter with Christ "into terms of the primal and ultimate" (Robinson) would fall under Bultmann's notion of myth as "symbol" or "image."

⁴⁶ Robinson, *In the End, God*, 57.

messianic banquet is celebrated whenever the wine is drunk new in the kingdom of God; Satan falls from heaven as each man decides for the gospel, and in the finished work of Christ the prince of this world has been judged; the last assize is being wrought out in every moment of choice and decision; Christ is all in all, since all things *have been* reconciled in him.⁴⁷

The purpose of the eschatological myth is to describe “what *is*,” not “what *will be*.”⁴⁸ Eschatological myths “are necessary transpositions into the key of the hereafter of knowledge of God and his relation to men given in the revelatory encounter of present historical event.”⁴⁹

Like Morse, Robinson translates the NT language of heaven into the present tense, though he does so far more straightforwardly. Morse’s ambiguity and indirectness serves to unsettle the reader of his book in a way that corresponds to the unsettling effect of the apocalyptic event in Christ, but this ends up leaving the reader with many burning questions. For this reason, Robinson’s directness, though potentially disturbing to some readers, aids in the ongoing discussion of his claims. At the same time, like Morse, Robinson does not seem to recognize that this translation is a *demythologizing* of the biblical myths of heaven. Both of them seem to assume that their apocalyptic and existential interpretations of heaven-talk capture the original meanings of these texts. But this is an unsustainable position. The original expectation of a chronologically imminent *parousia* and the literal-historical establishment of God’s messianic reign is an undeniable feature of primitive Christian worship,⁵⁰ even if Morse and Robinson (with Bultmann) are right to argue that such an expectation is not itself ingredient in the gospel itself, and is thus dispensable or “deliteralizable.” The fact that mythical language is necessary to narrate the content of our faith does not mean that the ancient metaphysical and mythological *meaning* of such language is necessary. Bultmann remains correct in his judgment that “the use of mythological language, far from being an objection to de-mythologizing, positively demands it.”⁵¹

Unlike Morse, however, Robinson’s book addresses issues about which the former remains mostly silent: the future of the earth and the extent

⁴⁷ Ibid., 58-59.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 56.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 28.

⁵⁰ Robinson seems to acknowledge as much when he later describes the difference between Paul’s understanding of two resurrections in contrast to the modern hope in a single general resurrection. See *ibid.*, 86-88.

⁵¹ Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, 67.

of God's saving purposes. Regarding the first, Robinson states the following:

If this understanding of the *mythical* character of the eschatological statement is accepted, it will become clear that the Christian has no more knowledge of or interest in the final state of this planet than he has of its first. . . . Of course, the Christian cannot say that the "events" of the end will *not* literally take place, any more than one can assert that an Adam and an Eve did *not* live in a garden in Mesopotamia. He can only declare that, as a Christian, he has no interest in these matters. He is concerned, alike in the myths of the beginning and of the end, with the present.⁵²

A statement along these lines is a sign of the author's respect for the reader and the willingness to state clearly one's position on contentious matters. Morse's book strongly implies the same basic stance, but he leaves the matter ambiguous. The second issue is the question of universalism. This is, of course, the driving concern of Robinson's entire study. I do not have time in this essay to develop his argument in any detail, since my concern is primarily with how these authors approach the biblical language of heaven. Suffice it to say that Robinson takes a "Barthian" approach in that he bases his entire soteriology on the bedrock of a fully realized redemption in the work of Christ. Everything *has* already happened *in him*, and for this reason alone, it has happened *for all*: "All things must be summed up in Christ, because in principle all things already are. Hell is an ultimate impossibility, because *already* there *is* no one outside Christ."⁵³ Robinson has the grip of a bulldog on this christocentric claim regarding salvation. It is no less the case for Morse, but whereas Robinson treats heaven in the context of an existential soteriology, Morse treats the topic more as a matter of theological ethics. Each of them could and should learn from the other: Robinson's book lacks the sociopolitical ethics of heaven that Morse develops so creatively, while Morse lacks a fuller discussion of soteriology that would help ground his ethical reflection in the work of Christ. Robinson would also have benefited from an exposure to a post-Martyn version of apocalypticism. The following words by Robinson would feel perfectly at home in Morse's text: "The world *has been* redeemed. Hell has been harrowed, and none can

⁵² Robinson, *In the End, God*, 62-63.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 113.

finally make it their home. The shadow of the cross has fallen aslant it: the halls of death are condemned property.”⁵⁴

As I noted above, this special edition of Robinson’s work has been published as a contribution to the rise (and, in some sense, the recovery) of EU. This development within evangelicalism is worthy of close attention, especially with the release of the very fine volume of essays on universalism throughout Christian history, *“All Shall Be Well”: Universal Salvation and Christian Theology from Origen to Moltmann*, also edited by Gregory MacDonald/Robin Parry.⁵⁵ EU agrees with the “Arminian” view that an individual has to make a conscious decision of faith in Christ in order to be saved; it only disagrees with the traditional notion that such a decision has to be made before death. This “Arminianism” is, I believe, the point of connection between EU and Robinson’s work: both make the decision of faith the determinative center of Christian existence. But EU disagrees with Robinson’s “Barthian” notion that salvation is fully and finally accomplished *in Christ*, with the result that individual faith is *not* the actualization of something that Christ merely makes possible. Faith for Robinson—and, I think, for Morse as well—is the acknowledgement of a divine action that is already finished in Jesus Christ. It does not have any *objective* salvific significance in itself, though Robinson does give it a very crucial *subjective* significance as determining our concrete relation to our objective identity in Christ. EU, by contrast, *does* give salvific significance to our subjective conversion. Its vision of universal salvation is then based on the possibility of *post-mortem conversion*, a possibility that these proponents claim will, in the eternal future, result in the salvation of all. Adherents to EU believe there is a hell of conscious torment, but they reject the view that it is impossible to escape hell via conversion to faith. Robinson and Morse, however, firmly oppose giving the individual such a significant role in the realization of salvation. On this point, both of them stand in a Pauline apocalyptic tradition that places all the emphasis on God’s fully actualized work in Christ—what Morse identifies as the heavenly forthcoming of God.

It is in large part due to EU’s axiomatic affirmation of post-mortem salvation that Parry, writing as MacDonald, rejects Robinson’s claim (in the block quote above) that the Christian is not interested in what will literally occur in the chronological future: “But surely that is just wrong. If the

⁵⁴ Ibid., 115.

⁵⁵ Gregory MacDonald, ed., *“All Shall Be Well”: Explorations in Universalism and Christian Theology from Origen to Moltmann* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011).

cosmos will never *actually* be ‘resurrected’ at some future time then the very thing that invests the present with eschatological significance is voided and the myth becomes no more than [sic] wishful thinking—a *false* myth.”⁵⁶ Parry goes on to cite two passages where Robinson seems to speak more confidently about the temporal end of the world, as evidence of what Robinson actually thinks, or at least what he *ought* to think.⁵⁷ Notice first that this places Robinson in precisely the same situation as Morse: both lay all the theological emphasis upon the existential present, but they nevertheless speak at times about a still-future historical end that will consummate God’s will. But is Parry right to say that Robinson’s earlier statement is “just wrong”? Is a literal cosmic resurrection in the future—and thus some notion of heaven as a post-mortem location—required in order to invest the present with significance? Morse does not seem to think so, and he makes a cogent case for why that is through his apocalyptic reading of scripture. But he and Robinson are somewhat unclear on this problem, so we have to leave the matter unresolved, at least as it pertains to their work.

The more pressing issue is with the position of EU on heaven and hell. It is worth noting that *The Evangelical Universalist* has a lengthy chapter on hell, but no sustained discussion of heaven. For Morse, by contrast, it is precisely the rehearing of heaven that forces a rehearing of hell as well—as that which has been *overcome* by the forthcoming of God. Without this rehearing, Parry remains within a univocal literalism, which treats heaven and hell as post-mortem extensions of our bodily existence. This is most evident in the way he presupposes, along with most literalist evangelicals, that the Apocalypse of John concerns future events in salvation history. The problem then is how to support a universal salvation if heaven and hell are actual destinations. Parry does this by arguing, as others have before him, that the judgment of hell is not an eternal condition—it is “a terrible *but temporary* fate”⁵⁸—and that conversion remains possible beyond death.⁵⁹ Certainly, if we take the traditional hearing of heaven as our starting-

⁵⁶ Robinson, *In the End, God*, x.

⁵⁷ The two passages are: “The temporal end (or *finis*) will certainly reflect and embody the moment of ultimate significance (as the last move of a chess match translates into finality the move that really won)” (ibid., 48); “the meaning of history must be vindicated *within* history and yet . . . the complete purpose of God must *transcend* history” (ibid., 88).

⁵⁸ MacDonald, *The Evangelical Universalist*, 155.

⁵⁹ Cf. ibid., 32: “What is it about death that would fix humans against God in a way that they were not previously fixed? Why should it be that from that moment on change is

point, combined with the free-will evangelical assumption that we actualize our salvation through the decision of faith, then this kind of post-mortem extension of God's offer of salvation is necessary to establish a universalist eschatology. But what if heaven needs to be heard anew, as Morse argues? And what if the nature of our decision of faith has to be understood anew, as Robinson argues? What if the gospel itself demands a thorough demythologizing of this account of heaven and hell? The republication of Robinson's classic study will hopefully bring some of his insights to a new evangelical audience. But this needs to be situated within Morse's apocalyptic-theopolitical rehearing of the gospel news about heaven. If *evangelical* universalism necessarily means a univocal literalism, then ironically it may be necessary to give up our ties to (this form of) evangelicalism in the name of the gospel (*euangēlion*) itself.

REMYTHOLOGIZING HEAVEN: HEAVEN AS CONSTRUCTIVE-PARADIGMATIC TRUTH

I have argued in this paper that Morse and Robinson present two ways of demythologizing the biblical talk of heaven. Over against a literal state of bliss in the hereafter, Morse hears heaven as an apocalyptic promise that proclaims a divine incursion in the incalculable Christ-event. Robinson interprets heaven as an eschatological myth that transposes into the future what the believer knows to be true here and now. Both insist on the necessity of mythical language, yet both still engage in a demythologizing of heaven—something that becomes clear when we correctly understand the nature of Bultmann's project. Morse would benefit from clarifying his position on the question of universal salvation and the end of history, while Robinson, along with the evangelical universalists, need to attend to the apocalyptic interpretation of heaven.

In this conclusion, I want to briefly suggest an alternative account of heaven as myth. The goal will be to connect aspects of Robinson's conception of myth with Morse's apocalyptic interpretation, with the result that we can affirm a remythologizing of heaven at the same time that we acknowledge the necessity of demythologizing. We can accomplish this by appropriating the sociological theory of myth formulated by Bruce Lincoln. Here is the definition of myth from the opening of his 1989 work, *Discourse and the Construction of Society*, which I will quote at length:

impossible? . . . If one says that change is possible, then one opens the door for the possibility of post-mortem salvation."

In my view we would do better to classify narratives not by their content but by the claims that are made by their narrators and the way in which those claims are received by their audience(s). Thus, some narratives make no truth-claims at all, but rather present themselves and are accepted as fictions pure and simple: These I propose to call Fable. Others, in differing styles and degrees, purport to offer accurate accounts of past events. But of the stories that make such truth-claims, only some have sufficient persuasive power to gain general acceptance, and the others—those that, in the opinion of their primary audience, lack credibility—I shall classify as Legend, calling those that do have credibility, History. . . . Beyond this, there is one further category, and that a crucial one: Myth—by which I designate that small class of stories that possess both credibility and *authority*. . . . In part I have in mind something similar to what Malinowski meant when he described myth as a form of social charter and what Clifford Geertz meant in his characterization of religion as being simultaneously a “model of” and a “model for” reality. That is to say, a narrative possessed of authority is one for which successful claims are made not only to the status of truth, but what is more, to the status of *paradigmatic* truth. In this sense the authority of myth is somewhat akin to that of charters, models, templates, and blueprints, but one can go beyond this formulation and recognize that it is also (and perhaps more important) akin to that of revolutionary slogans and ancestral invocations, in that through the recitation of myth one may effectively mobilize a social grouping. Thus, myth is not just a coding device in which important information is conveyed, on the basis of which actors *can then* construct society. It is also a discursive act through which actors evoke the sentiments out of which society is actively constructed.⁶⁰

Like Robinson, Lincoln posits a myth that has the function of a model—but he augments that account by understanding it as both “model of”

⁶⁰ Bruce Lincoln, *Discourse and the Construction of Society: Comparative Studies of Myth, Ritual, and Classification* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 24-25.

and “model for.” Robinson’s “model of” only captures the *representative* nature of myth as a picture or theory that extends or transposes a community’s knowledge about God (based on revelation) into the future. Lincoln’s “model for” conveys the *constructive* nature of myth as a program or charter that mobilizes a community for practical action in the world. The former sees myth as symbolic truth; the latter as “paradigmatic truth.” By understanding myth in this way, we are able to incorporate Morse’s ethical and political reflections into a mythical account of heaven.

I am proposing that we remythologize heaven in Lincoln’s constructive-paradigmatic sense of myth. The mythical nature of heaven has to be recovered in such a way that talk of heaven is, as Lincoln puts it, “akin to that of revolutionary slogans and ancestral invocations.” The apocalyptic promise of God’s heavenly forthcoming is mythical precisely because it mobilizes a community of faithful action in service to God. The word of heaven’s irruption into the world is a revolutionary word that identifies us as children of God and commands us to go out in radical obedience. The community goes forth in correspondence to the forthcoming of God. We *are invoked* at the same time that we *invoke* God’s name in prayer and thanksgiving. The myth of heaven is thus socially constructive in two senses: first, it constitutes the community of believers as a people living in faithful obedience to God’s word; second, it then compels this community to construct their sociopolitical existence in such a way that it corresponds to God’s heavenly reign. Heaven is paradigmatic not in the sense of a literal blueprint that tells us how to create heaven on earth, but rather as gospel news that gives the community a new way of seeing the world as the place of God’s heavenly advent. Like Martyn’s notion of “seeing bifocally,” the myth of heaven is a contravening vision of the world; it mobilizes the community in a way that scandalously disrupts the systems of death and oppression that falsely claim dominion.

The benefit of interpreting heaven as a paradigmatic truth is not that it gives new content to our talk of heaven, but instead it reframes the way we hear and interpret this content. It means, as Morse rightly states, that our hearing of heaven in the gospel is irreducibly ethical in nature. There is no theological kernel that one can articulate apart from its sociopolitical purpose. It is this aspect of Morse’s thesis that provides the fundamental correction (or perhaps supplement) to the more existential picture of Bultmann and Robinson. A further benefit of this remythologizing of heaven is that it opens up ways of critically analyzing the false myths of heaven that

are prevalent in our culture today. The old fundamentalist-dispensational myth of heaven as a post-rapture state of bliss is thus falsified not only on strictly scriptural terms, but equally on the basis of the kind of model for Christian life that it provides. Its function as paradigmatic truth results in an ethic that is void of the revolutionary action authorized by the gospel news of Jesus Christ. We can trace fundamentalist politics back to their particular myth of heaven. Christian engagement with the world is grounded on paradigmatic myths of heaven, and we have to test these myths against the gospel news to ensure that our sociopolitical action is consonant with God's mobilizing word in Christ. The argument of this paper is that a properly evangelical myth of heaven has to hear of God's apocalyptic invasion of the cosmos in Christ as an event that demands a radical decision of faith and an even more radical obedience as missionary agents of God's gracious reign within the world.

Finally, it is worth noting that this remythologizing of heaven coincides with, even necessitates, the demythologizing of heaven described earlier. Heaven as theopolitical charter—that is, as God's *invocation* of the community for the sake of a new worldly *vocation*—obviously runs against any conception of heaven as a post-mortem destination for believers. At the very least, this understanding of Christian faith is indifferent to the traditional notion of heaven. What will or will not occur in the chronological future is not the concern of the gospel kerygma. The concern is rather with a *present* decision and a *present* mobilization. We therefore have to distinguish between two kinds of mythical thinking: the social myth articulated by Lincoln, and the metaphysical mythology criticized by Bultmann and Morse. The former is a myth that concerns the action of the community; the latter is a mythological thinking that concerns our speech about God, and which views God as something “in hand.” The task of theology proposed in this paper is to demythologize heaven in the sense of myth-as-metaphysics and remythologize heaven in the sense of myth-as-paradigm. In this way, theology will speak of God as an apocalyptic event “at hand” and of the community as a constructed and constructing agent of heavenly witness within the world.

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Book Reviews

Tom Greggs, *Barth, Origen, and Universal Salvation: Restoring Particularity*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2009. 242 pp. \$110.00 (hardback)

Tom Greggs, in a revision of a doctoral thesis written under David Ford at Cambridge, takes on the daunting task of bringing together the thought of two of Christianity's greatest and most controversial theologians—Origen and Karl Barth—on the contentious subject of universal salvation. Greggs believes that our cultural situation, in which “terror is carried out reputedly in the name of God, and in which political rhetoric can conjure apocalyptic imagery,” requires Christians to rethink “separationist eschatology” (vii). The scriptural and doctrinal problems that separationism engenders—such as the severance of God's love from God's will—are equally troubling for Greggs. These concerns do not, however, lead Greggs to adopt “the liberal pluralist agenda” (85). Rather, Greggs insists that any soteriology that seeks to go beyond the saved-damned binary must maintain “particularism,” by which he means that (1) the unique person and work of Christ must be respected, (2) attention must be given to distinctively Christian convictions, there can be no generalized religiosity, and (3) human individuality and meaningful action must not be obliterated (xiv). Greggs looks to Karl Barth and Origen as the exemplars of particularistic universal salvation. His book follows a chiastic structure: in the first part he describes how the particular work of the Son affects universal salvation in Barth and Origen and in the second part he demonstrates how the Spirit particularizes this universal work in the church and in individuals.

In Part I, Greggs recounts several aspects of Barth's doctrine of universal election, while showing how they maintain particularity. For example, while drawing attention to Barth's depiction of Jesus Christ as both the electing God and the elected human, Greggs makes sure to point out that the primacy of the particular election of Christ does not result in a simply passive election for those elected in Him. One of the highlights of this chapter is that Greggs challenges some of the reoccurring and tiresome critiques of Barth's theology offered by less careful readers; for example, that Barth leaves no room for meaningful human action or that Barth collapses time and eternity with the result that temporality is robbed of any

real significance. As he must, Greggs also addresses the question of whether Barth was a universalist. Barth explicitly denied universalism but the logic of Barth's theology seems to point towards it as many of both Barth's sympathizers and critics have argued. Greggs thinks he is a universalist, a position he defends by arguing that in Barth's theology universalism does not become a "principle" in such a way that it undermines the particularity of the person and work of Christ. He believes this is a move consistent with Barth's thought.

Greggs also covers a lot of ground in his treatment of Origen. While describing how Origen's soteriology is particularistic universalism, Greggs simultaneously has to defend Origen against critics who question his orthodoxy because of his doctrine of the pre-existence of souls and because of the subordinationism many find in his understanding of the Son's relationship to the Father. Interestingly, Greggs finds that Origen's doctrine of pre-existent souls is one of the places that particularity is most obvious. In Origen's view, every soul moves in a different way away from the holy fire, thus establishing individuality. Salvation occurs as our souls move back towards this point of origin in union with Christ. This restorative movement, which everyone undergoes, maintains particularity because growth, diversity, and free will are all upheld.

After drawing together the themes in Barth and Origen's understanding of the Son's work that should be included in any account of universalism, such as the particularity of the Son's work, supralapsarianism, and the continuance of human particularity alongside that of Jesus, in the second part of the book, Greggs describes the ways in which the Holy Spirit establishes Christian particularity while applying the universal work of the Son. For Barth, the Spirit is responsible for the subjective reception of revelation. Therefore, the Spirit creates Christian particularity because the Spirit is active in Christians in a way that the Spirit is not among non-Christians. The Spirit's particularizing work also includes building up the community, leading Christians to confess Christ, binding humans together in prayer, guaranteeing future salvation, and calling the church to witness. Origen argues that the Holy Spirit is responsible for bringing Christ to individuals, but the Spirit is also very active in sanctification and this is the place in Origen where the Spirit's work is most particular. The Spirit purifies and perfects Christians as they move towards the Father with all creation. Therefore, Christians participate in God's holiness now, while others will have to wait.

In his introduction, Greggs is honest about the methodological problems involved in interacting with theologians who are separated by over fifteen hundred years. Perhaps this is why Barth and Origen are not truly put in conversation in this work. It might be more appropriate to say that their views on universal salvation are placed side by side—the major differences in their soteriologies are not brought to the forefront. Nevertheless, Greggs is successful in doing what he set out to do: showing how the universalism (or something very close to it) advocated by Origen and Karl Barth maintains the particularity of Jesus, Christian convictions, and individual Christians. After reading this book, however, one is left wondering who Greggs' intended audience is. The limited scope of Greggs' argument, along with the fact that he does not register any significant disagreements with Barth or Origen, means that both Barth and Origen specialists may not find what they are looking for here. Those looking for an argument for universalism will not find that here either. Greggs barely interacts with critics of universalism and when he does he tends to lump them all together—a move bound to be frustrating to opponents of universalism. One supposes that those who will most appreciate Greggs' work for what it is—a description of the way that both Origen and Karl Barth can be viewed as proponents of particularistic universal salvation—are Christians who have been persuaded by arguments for universalism, perhaps as a result of recent books by authors such as "Gregory Macdonald," have heard that universalism has been advocated by other Christian theologians, and, thus, are looking for a good entryway into the soteriology of some of these thinkers. Greggs' clear and concise book will certainly be helpful to these people, not in the least because most of his interaction with secondary literature is confined to the footnotes. Everyone else will have to wait eagerly for Greggs' future works in which one anticipates that his broader and more constructive ideas will be allowed to shine through. I, for one, will look forward to seeing what he produces.

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James Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2011. 178 pp. \$28.00 (hardback)

James Hal Cone's powerful and insightful work *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* examines the historical and theological connection between the cross of Jesus Christ (the symbol of Christian salvation) and the lynching tree (the quintessential symbol of black suffering) (xiii). Reflecting on sources as diverse as Reinhold Niebuhr, Martin Luther King Jr., black artists and musicians, as well as Womanists scholars, Cone argues that the cross has and continues to be central to black faith in U.S. America—with blacks identifying their own suffering with the suffering of Jesus of Nazareth. This identification is two-fold, with blacks first identifying with the innocent, crucified Jesus who experienced unjust suffering in a fashion similar to the ways in which blacks have experienced the unjust suffering of white supremacy. Secondly, blacks identify with the costly discipleship and paradoxical nature of “choosing” the cross, as they chose the cross of resistance to white supremacy embodied in the era of the civil rights movement. For Cone, the lynching tree is the most “vivid reenactment” of the cross in modern history, which is reflected in Cone's evident frustration and anger with regard to white theologians who—for all of their imagination and brilliance in their theological endeavors—failed, and continue to fail, to make the connection between the theological as well as historical significance of the cross and lynching tree (32). For Cone, the cross and the lynching tree must be viewed together, and until this is done, “there can be no genuine understanding of Christian identity in U.S. America, and no deliverance from the brutal legacy of slavery and white supremacy” (xv).

In Chapter 1 Cone examines the history of lynching in U.S. America as well as the response of the black community to this violent reality through its musical expression (the blues) and black religion. During the era of lynching (1840-1940), nearly five thousand blacks would lose their lives (3). Lynching, according to Cone, served as a means of keeping blacks in their place in order for whites to maintain hegemonic social control (5). Drawing on the work of blues artists like Robert Johnson, Skip James, Blind Lemon Jefferson, and B.B. King (to name a few) Cone posits that blacks found hope in the blues and “a collective self-transcendent meaning in the singing, dancing, loving, and laughing” (13). In a similar fashion, black faith offered hope in the midst of suffering with the cross of Jesus becoming central to black religious expression. Whether in prayer, song, or preaching, no other

theme received as much attention as the cross of Jesus (21). The mystery of the cross could be found in blacks' identification with the suffering Jesus who went through an experience of suffering similar to their own. Just as God was with Jesus, God was also with the black community as they dealt with the reality of lynching and white supremacy (21-22).

In chapter 2, Cone proceeds to examine the life and theology of Reinhold Niebuhr in an attempt to understand the blindness of white theologians to the reality of white supremacy in their theological discourse. More specifically, he probes how white theologians could have ignored the glaring historical/theological connections between the cross and the lynching tree. Cone believes that to "reflect on this failure is to address a defect in the conscience of white Christians and to suggest why African Americans have needed to trust and cultivate their own theological imagination" (32). After a brief biographical/theological sketch of Niebuhr's life and thought, Cone posits that although the cross was central to Niebuhr's social ethics and theology, he failed to engage the black community in their struggle against racism, which is reflected in his theology which failed to connect the cross to the overwhelming reality of men and women being crucified daily throughout U.S. America. Cone believes that Niebuhr's influence and brilliance cannot be denied. On the other hand, he is a glaring example of the failure of white theologians to use the experience of blacks suffering in U.S. America as a source of theological reflection (64).

After examining the failure of white theologians to contend with the evils of white supremacy, Chapter 3 focuses on the theology Martin Luther King Jr.—Cone believes he reflects the voluntary and revolutionary nature of the cross as he, and countless others, took up the cross in the black struggle for freedom during the civil rights movement. Cone posits that King bore "two crosses," one of white supremacy and the other of black leadership. The first cross was imposed by society and the second cross was assumed willingly (81). These two crosses reflect the running theme of the book, with Cone holding them in tension as both a reflection of imposed injustice and suffering and also something willingly undertaken as a means of resistance. It is within Cone's examination of King's life that he explicitly expounds on these two crosses, although they are implicitly present throughout the entire work. For King, reflected not only in his actions but also in his preaching (82), the cross is redemptive, and somehow the unmerited nonviolent suffering of black men, women, and children might one day redeem the soul of U.S. America (87).

The “recrucified Christ” is examined in chapter 4. This “recrucified Christ” is evident in the work of black artists, writers, and poets who drew a direct connection between the lynched black body and the crucified body of Jesus of Nazareth. Cone believes “the clearest image of the crucified Christ was the figure of an innocent black victim, dangling from a lynching tree” (93). Black artists, whom Cone deemed “society’s prophets” (94), attempted to tell the story of black suffering through paintings, essays, poetry and song. This chapter is filled with many disturbing yet powerful illustrations as reflected in the words of Langston Hughes’ poem entitled “Christ of the South.” He wrote: “Christ is a nigger, Beaten and black—*Oh bare your back...Most holy bastard Of the bleeding mouth, Nigger Christ On the Cross of the South*” (114). Cone draws from other artists and writers like Walter Everette Hawkins, W. E. B. Du Bois, Langston Hughes, and Claude McKay to reiterate that although white theologians and religious leaders failed to see the connection between the cross and the lynching tree, the black artist made the connection explicitly, which is reflected in their powerful songs, poems, paintings and essays.

Cone devotes chapter 5 to exploring the ways in which black women suffered during the lynching era, combating the assumption that the victims of lynching were only male. Black women were also the victims of lynching, sometimes simply because the male had escaped and the mob needed a victim to stand in his place. Often times, black women suffered lynching stemming from their courageous challenge to white supremacy, “refusing to stay in any place that denied their dignity” (122). The chapter focuses on the anti-lynching work of Ida B. Wells, “the pioneer of the anti-lynching crusade,” (126) as well as Billy Holiday’s powerful rendition of “Strange Fruit,” written by Abel Meeropol, after seeing a photograph of a lynching in Marion, Indiana (134). Cone ends the chapter by speaking to the dangerous implications of certain cross theologies raised by Womanist scholars—like Delores Williams—who rejects traditional renderings of atonement theology, believing they only serve to reinforce surrogacy roles of black women (further discussion of this below).

In the conclusion, Cone speaks again of suffering, and also the need of many to make sense of that suffering, which has led him, inevitably, to explore the connections of the cross and lynching tree (153-154). Cone states, “Jesus was the ‘first lynchee,’ who foreshadowed all the lynched black bodies on American soil. . . . *Every time a white mob lynched a black person, they lynched Jesus.* The lynching tree is the cross in America.

When American Christians realize that they can meet Jesus only in the crucified bodies in our midst, they will encounter the real scandal of the cross" (158). For Cone, this lynching continues today, manifested in the reality of the prison industrial complex (163).

This book is beautiful, insightful, disturbing, and challenging. There is no doubt this work will contribute greatly to theological discourse concerning the cross, atonement, and the intersections of religion and race. I hoped, though, that Cone would have devoted more time to dealing with Womanist critiques of theologies of the cross, particularly that of Delores Williams. Williams rejects traditional interpretations of the cross in which Jesus dies and suffers in place of another, which reaffirms, in her view, the surrogacy roles of black women. Cone also claims to reject these traditional views of atonement, yet he examines and draws from these traditional cross theologies throughout the book, even employing the language of Jesus as "scapegoat" when referring to the lynching of a black man in chapter 3 (77). Many of the illustrations given from black faith traditions seem only to reinforce the idea of surrogacy and substitutionary atonement in reference to the cross. For instance, the language of "Jesus died on the Roman cross for me; through his mercy all my sins are forgiven" spoken by Steve Allen before being lynched in 1899 (26). Also the words of Emmett Till's mother who heard a voice speaking that it was "ordained from the beginning of time that Emmett Louis Till would die a violent death" (68). Cone goes on to say that the spark that was lit in the civil rights movement because of Emmett Till's death justified the claim that Emmett was "the sacrificial lamb of the civil rights movement" (69). This would appear to be treading on the dangerous ground of traditional atonement theologies—rejected by Delores Williams as well as Cone—which posit that Jesus was "ordained" to die in our place for some salvific purpose. If this is not a theology that Cone holds himself (which he clearly states that he does not), it might have been helpful to critically examine not simply that the cross was central to black faith but the ways in which certain readings and appropriations of the cross by black Christians might be universally problematic. Cone is clear in his position on the cross toward the end of the book: stating that salvation through the cross is a mystery which no human words can fully describe, it is a story of God's solidarity with the oppressed, and "what is redemptive is the faith that God snatches victory out of defeat, life out of death, and hope out of despair" (150). This appears to be different from theologies that contend Jesus "died in my place," or that death and suffering were "ordained from the beginning

of time.” I had hoped to see these addressed in more detail. In spite of this, Cone’s book will serve to further the discourse in theology concerning the cross, and furthermore, should spark a renewed theological interest in the connections between the cross and crucified peoples all over the globe.

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Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, New York: The New Press, 2010. 290 pp. \$27.95 (hardcover)

The moment last semester when the emotional tide turned in the class of all white, evangelical Christian students I was teaching came as I presented this quote from *The New Jim Crow*:

Studies show that people of all colors *use and sell* illegal drugs at remarkably similar rates. If there are significant differences in the surveys to be found, they frequently suggest that whites, particularly white youth, are more likely to engage in drug crime than people of color. (7)

Hearing this, one of my more disengaged students (I’ll call her Amy) literally sat up in her chair—and kept sitting that way the rest of the semester. Alexander’s thesis—that colorblindness has masked the fact that the “War on Drugs” is in reality a war on black communities—hit the class as first as counterintuitive and then as shocking.

Early in the course I had unsuccessfully attempted to prick the conscience of the class. At one point I asked whether they thought it unjust that nearly 70 percent of those convicted for illegal drug usage were blacks when they consume only 12 percent of those drugs.¹ Appealing further to their Biblicist convictions, I had piled on Isaiah 61: 1, the same passage Jesus would read aloud some centuries later to inaugurate his public ministry: “The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to

¹ Cornel West, preface to *Race Matters* (New York: Vintage Books, 2001), xv.

bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound.” Wasn’t this prophetic statement relevant to the disproportionate incarceration of black people for drug offenses? The students told me they didn’t think so since “those people” shouldn’t have been doing drugs in the first place. Their pat answer? Imprison every offender, regardless of race.

It was at this nadir in my class that Michelle Alexander’s book fell into my hands, recasting both the tone and the substance of the study of whiteness we were undertaking in the class. Her thesis grows the more compelling the farther one reads into her work: The present war on drugs, which came to full force in the early 1980s and was premised on the racial ideology of colorblindness, is in fact anything but colorblind as it singles out, labels as felons, and imprisons disproportionate numbers of African Americans. The result is a racial caste system that is unprecedented in American history—or, for that matter, in any economically advanced nation today. As I presented more of Alexander’s work in the weeks that followed, the students began to recognize the white racial privilege embedded in the racetalk of those we were ethnographically observing in our own empirical research. In the self-reflection portion of her final paper for the class, Amy described how as a young white woman, I was raised to take caution when any stranger approached me: male or female, white or colored. However, my parents and particularly my dad made an extra point to stress the importance of staying away from strangers who were black men. I remember being particularly young, possibly about seven or eight years old, and having my dad kneel down close to me in a shopping mall and point out a black man that had just walked past. He got close to my face and said, “That man is a jigaboo, and you don’t ever talk to people that look like him. They’re jigaboos and they just want to cause problems.” This and other snippets said by my dad will be remembered forever; knowing that he meant well and just wanted to protect me, but it originated from having a racist attitude towards black men. It was because of this memory that I particularly wanted to research the theory of white fear and look into a white’s assumptions of black violence.

From the “criminalblackman” stereotype Alexander explicates in the book to the inner-workings of a criminal justice system that mass produces black felons at a higher rate than our higher education system graduates young black men, the consistent response of my students to the parts of Alexander’s work I presented was one of disbelief often followed by outrage.

Alexander's text provided another teachable moment when we operationalized one of her thought experiments. Alexander makes this suggestion: "Say the following to nearly anyone and watch the reaction: 'We really need to do something about the problem of white crime.'" (193) After presenting the statement to four people, my students returned incredulous at the nearly uniform responses white people from all walks of life gave them to the statement. What they discovered accorded with Alexander's point that "the term *white crime* is nonsensical in the era of mass incarceration . . . In the era of mass incarceration, what it means to be a criminal in our collective consciousness has become conflated with what it means to be black, so the term *white criminal* is confounding, while the term *black criminal* is nearly redundant." (193)

One student reported that when she put the "white crime" statement to her roommate, the roommate replied predictably that she didn't know what was meant by "white crime," then swung around to her keyboard and googled for a definition. The results that populated the screen—entries on "white collar crime" and "black-on-white crime" but none on white crime itself—reinforced Alexander's point. "The term *white crime* lacks social meaning." (193) In class, we got the same results when we replicated the search, and then we googled "black crime" and got multiple pages of everyday, "commonsense" usages of the term.

This conflation of criminality with blackness is, as Alexander points out, the result of an asymmetrical use of colorblindness: the color of the individual black male is seen and made visible by white society at key moments that serve to preserve white privilege, such as when marking all young African American males as "potential criminal," but not when white suburban youth are "experimenting" with drugs or using them "recreationally"—or are caught driving drunk or waging a high school mass shooting. At these white moments, color abruptly evaporates. Likewise for my students, when 70 percent of those incarcerated for drug offenses are black even though black people constitute only 12 percent of the drug offenses, and even though these black offenders languish under inordinately long prison sentences relative to violent crimes, they suddenly turned avowedly color neutral, claiming to see only the moral and legal categories of offenders, not their race.

One reason Alexander's quote on white youth drug offenses so effectively opened the eyes of my students was because it hit home

personally and racially: the statistics “suggest that whites, *particularly white youth*, are more likely to engage in drug crime than people of color.” (7) Until they saw themselves in the equation, no scripture passage or social science statistic could penetrate the moral sensibilities of the students. Their breed of Christian faith and its underlying status quo theology was itself color-coded to intercept and neutralize any numerical fact or biblical precept one might put to them. I could quote Isaiah and pair that with an incarceration statistic, but until my students could begin to realize that *how* they read Isaiah in light of that statistic was already conditioned by their whiteness—that is, by self-serving colorblindness—the prophetic word and the statistic could not be brought to bear on each other. Their conflation of criminality-and-blackness—and their inverse equation of innocence-and-whiteness—were of one logical piece already implicit in their white Christian theology.

For subscribers to a theology journal, reading Alexander’s deeply ethical framing of the new Jim Crow of our era and the white colorblindness that makes it possible primes the pump for a richer re-reading of standard fare doctrinal discourse. For example, in J. Kameron Carter’s *Race: A Theological Account* of the conjoined birth of whiteness and European theology, the case is made that the modern invention of race or the story of its naturalization is a problem that is pseudotheological or religious in character. More specifically, I argue that behind the modern problem of race is the problem of how Christianity and Western civilization came to be thoroughly identified with each other . . . Remade into cultural and political property and converted into an ideological instrument to aid and abet colonial conquest, Christianity became a vehicle for the religious articulation of whiteness, though increasingly masked to the point of near invisibility.²

James Cone had put it more bluntly: “American theology is racist.” Lacking basic human compassion, it is impervious to the sufferings of oppressed peoples. “How else,” Cone asked in 1970, “can we explain the theological silence during the period of white lynchings of black humanity in this nation?”³ In 2010, Alexander pushes us to ask the equivalent question of the unholy silence of the very white churches my students overwhelmingly were shaped by. By the end of the course, the many of the students were

² J. Kameron Carter, *Race: A Theological Account* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 229.

³ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation: Fortieth Anniversary Edition* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 20

recognizing that we have today the equivalent of black concentration camps disguised as prisons and a yellow star-of-David labeling system in the form of the seemingly innocuous job application question "Have you ever been convicted of a felony?" Alexander's call to open the prisons for those who are bound can be a divine Word, a prophetic voice that moves us from indifference to recognition and compassion and action. It is only easy to dismiss her claims in *The New Jim Crow* if the pages of this amazing tome of solid research and compelling logic and wisdom are left unturned.

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